Since 1954 the Regional Oral History Office has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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[End of Interview]
Interview Description—Olly Wilson

Professor Olly Wilson was interviewed as part of both the African American Faculty and Senior Staff Oral History Project and the American Composer series. The African American Faculty and Senior Staff Oral History Project explores the experiences of African American faculty and senior staff at UC Berkeley as part of the broader history of the University of California and its commitment to access and diversity.

Professor Wilson joined UC Berkeley’s Department of Music in 1970. Born in 1937 in St. Louis, Missouri, Olly Wilson grew up playing jazz piano with local groups in St. Louis and double bass in several orchestras. Receiving his B.M. degree from Washington University in St. Louis in 1959, he went on to obtain his M.Mus. degree from the University of Illinois, and a Ph.D. from the University of Iowa in 1964. His primary composition teachers were Robert Wykes, Robert Kelley, and Phillip Bezanson. In 1967 he studied electronic music at the University of Illinois, and from 1971-72 lived in West Africa, where he studied traditional music. He has since published several scholarly articles on African and African American music. Wilson has written extensively for chamber, orchestral, and electronic media. He has long been active both as a conductor and an advocate of contemporary music. At UC Berkeley, Professor Wilson served as Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action, a post which gave him special insight into hiring and promotion processes at the University.

The eleven sessions that comprise this interview took place over the course of a nine month period, from September of 2002 through June of 2003. Professor Wilson was jointly interviewed by myself and Carolyn Crawford for the first six interviews. Interviews seven through eleven were conducted by myself only. The interviews took place at Professor Wilson’s Berkeley home. Most interviews were recorded on minidisc and digital video. The interview was transcribed, audited, and edited and then given to Professor Wilson for his review.

This series is grounded in the premise that higher education is one of the primary strategies for gaining social equality--access to employment and income--for historically disadvantaged communities. Moreover, the University, comprised of its students and faculty and administration, with all of its intellectual and financial resources operates as a critical touchstone in processes of systemic social change. Therefore the university functions not simply as an educational institution, but also as a significant site of past, present, and future potential for imagining and crafting opportunity for ethnic and racial groups formerly excluded from higher education. This project recognizes that the University of California, as California’s premier public educational institution, plays a significant role in the socio-economic mobility of all of California’s residents. The story that we hope will emerge from this project is a story of California – its people and one of its most important public institutions.

This interview was conducted under the auspices of the Regional Oral History Office. The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through recorded oral memoirs the Library’s materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are
available for research use in the Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Neil Henry, Director, Regional Oral History Office, and Elaine Tennant, Director of the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Nadine Wilmot, Editor/interviewer
Regional Oral History Office
Berkeley, California
November, 2005
Interview 1: September 20, 2002

Crawford: All right. September 20, 2002, Nadine Wilmot and Caroline Crawford interviewing Olly Wilson for the Regional Oral History Office. I’d like to begin with the first question; I’d like to ask a global question. First of all, you were born September 7, 1937, in St. Louis.

Wilson: That’s right.

Crawford: And the first question I want to ask you is: who do you consider at this point in your life as a single influence, perhaps the principal influence on your life?

Wilson: Hmm. That’s a difficult question, simply because there are so many people who influenced me in different ways, but if I had to pick one, I think it would start back early in my childhood. I would start with the people closest to me, who were my parents. I think my mother and my father were the single most important influences on me, for different reasons. My father—

Crawford: Give us the name, would you?

Wilson: My father, Olly Wilson Senior—I’m a Junior. I rarely use the Junior, although the university still keeps the Junior in my record, but I don’t use the Junior much since his death. But at any rate, I’m a Junior. I didn’t have any choice about my name. My father was a very interesting person and the reason he was a principal influence on me was not only because he was my biological father and an excellent father in every way, but because he also was a musician. He was an amateur singer, and because he was an amateur singer and never pursued it professionally, although he did do some semi-professional work, I think he wanted to make sure that his children all had the opportunity to study music. He had such a deep interest and great respect for music, and he was an excellent performer himself. So that had a profound influence on me, and he was the first person who exposed music to me.

Crawford: He was a tenor?

Wilson: He was a tenor, and he had a remarkable voice. He sang in the church choir. His profession was as a butler and cook, but he sang in the church choir and other semi-professional choirs in the St. Louis area. He had gone to college. He didn’t graduate from college, but he had attended. And for a black man born in 1905 to have gone to college, in the twenties, that was somewhat exceptional; but he had great aspirations. So, because he was a musician and because he valued music so highly, he insisted that all of his children learn to play the piano. He thought understanding the piano was fundamental. We had to do that, because he wanted his children to have the skills that he didn’t have—you know, he had some of them, but not all of them. He had the natural talent; he didn’t have extensive formal training, but he had studied somewhat with some teachers. But what he really would have liked to have done, I’m
convinced, is to have had a career as a singer. So that legacy influenced me from the very beginning.

Crawford: You sang in your life.

Wilson: Absolutely.

Crawford: Now as a choral singer he must have been able to read music well.

Wilson: Oh, he read music—he taught himself to read music or he may have had some in college. He spent at least a couple of years in college, so he probably studied some of it there, but he was always constantly working on it. He didn’t play piano. He felt that was a great hindrance, so he mandated that all of his children play piano. Though he didn’t make a lot of money, he valued music so much that he gave us lessons from the best teachers that he could afford, and these were pretty good people. So I started at age—oh it must have been seven or eight, studying piano formally. And literally, his plan was to raise accompanists so—I had three sisters—all of us had to learn how to play piano, so that on Sundays, when he would go out and sing at soirées, teas, Sunday teas or Sunday programs, whatever programs, he would then say—once we had developed well enough to accompany him—he would then say, “Child number one, number two, number three, or number four, you will accompany me this day,” —and that was it. It was a mandate.

Crawford: And you were actually using music, or did you have to do this from—?

Wilson: No, it was sheet music. He wanted us to learn how to read, so we went to the Kregger School of Music in St. Louis. It was a very formal place and we learned, but it was on a private basis. It was a pretty good conservatory. So I learned how to read music early and I can recall some of the first books that I started—as a pianist, you would recall this as well—I think it was the John Thompson Series?

Crawford: Oh, yes, the Thompson books, uh-huh.

Wilson: Remember that? I remember the very first song; it started on “C” and they introduced the note “C.” I remember there were always texts associated with these little songs, and there was a song with the following words: [sings] “Oh here we go, up a road, to a birthday party.” You probably remember it.

Crawford: That’s remarkable. I remember Thompson’s and I remember not liking it very well, it wasn’t much fun.

Wilson: [laughs] Oh, yeah! Yeah, but it was that little song—but learning that song, learning how to play that song well, and then the second song, I can tell you the lyrics as well.
Crawford: A breakthrough, a breakthrough.

Wilson: Yes, I mean, it was really good. I was seven years old, so this was an introduction to music, and it was mandated by my father, who I admired. He said, “You will learn that.” It was only later on that I discovered that he insisted that we do that because he was raising accompanists. And as I used to say, as I say often jokingly, that he insisted that everybody that wanted to eat in his house had to learn how to play piano, because he needed accompanists.

Crawford: What did he play? What did he love to play, to sing?

Wilson: He loved to sing. He sang what we would consider the light classics, songs like, [sings] “Oh promise me that someday you and I will take a da, da, da, da, da, da, da.” You remember that? Or [sings] “Oh bless this house, oh Lord we pray, make it safe, by night and day—’’ I’ve forgotten the words but those kinds of songs, that we would call “light classics.” Some songs from musicals, but there were also occasionally popular songs.

Crawford: Some church music, some gospel?

Wilson: Some church music, mainly light classical. Now, he had the biggest and the best voice in the church choir. He had a beautiful tenor voice—it was a strong voice and he would often sing solos in the church choir. The church that I went to was the First Baptist Church in St. Louis, Missouri. Now it wasn’t the first black Baptist church, it was the First Baptist Church. Churches, as societies in those days, were segregated: there were white churches, black churches. But because this church had an interesting history—it was founded by people who were abolitionists, it must have been abolitionists, but they also had a missionary zeal. Many abolitionists did in the middle of the nineteenth century, so it was founded in the 1830’s as the First Baptist Church west of the Mississippi. It was designed primarily for the slaves, or the free Blacks who were living in that area, and it obtained the charter to be the First Baptist Church in St. Louis, Missouri. There is a very large and prominent Second Baptist Church, which is predominantly white. There is a large and prominent Third Baptist Church, which is predominantly white, but the First Baptist Church is still this church. So it was a historically interesting church.

And sociologically it was very interesting because in the community at the time, as a direct result of segregation, you had a wide range of people. You had church members who were very successful within the black community: doctors, lawyers, successful teachers, and so forth. Those were the elite professions. You also had the entrepreneurs, funeral home directors, hairdressers, and people who owned places of entertainment. And then, you had everybody else, which constituted the majority of people who did primarily menial kinds of work: laborers, either in factories, or working for private people, and there was a kind of hierarchy in that. Obviously, the people who had degrees and who were doctors and lawyers were usually at
the top. But at that time, we had the very top: doctors, lawyers, teachers, you know, who were educated, and then you had everybody else, most of them whom had recently migrated from the South.

My father was born in Arkansas, but after he and my mother married they came to St. Louis. So he was in that group of people who were in between, who had not been sharecroppers, because his family had owned a large farm then, so they were relatively—I guess you would call them middle class Blacks, by the standards of that time. But that social escalator moved up and down very rapidly in those days, as it still does, so that each generation had to create its own social status. There was not a tradition of having work passed on within the African American community at that time. So, when he came to St. Louis, he started out—even though he had two years of college, given segregation, at the lower level. The major opportunity available to him was working for people of wealth in some servant capacity, and so that’s what he became; he became a cook and a butler.

Crawford: In a family?

Wilson: In a family, in a very prominent family in St. Louis. Now because of that, and because he spoke English clearly—he was reasonably well educated, he had aspirations, essentially middle class aspirations—he was able to do well in the society in the thirties and the forties. Because having the skills that he had, even though there were also clear impediments to his success, he still was able to do better than a lot of other people because he did have that basic solid education. Therefore, he did have some time to pursue his music. And of course, the place that he was able to really develop this was in the church, because there were large churches, where the congregations valued music highly.

As a matter of fact, the minister of the church in my early youth was a medical doctor, which I thought was commonplace, and then I realized that there is a difference between people who are medical doctors and people who are doctors of divinity. It was a very large and a very successful church, and a dynamic church because of the fact that you had a lot of people from a lot of different professions there. And the church had an active program with youth programs: the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, and the Cub Scouts. I would imagine at its heyday there probably were five hundred people who attended church every Sunday.

Crawford: A big congregation.

Wilson: A large congregation. I remember the church building a new building, you know, with a large downstairs and a large balcony. And then I remember very vividly the pulpit because the pulpit was sort of raised as they usually are, and then behind the pulpit there were three choir lofts: one in the center, one on the left, and one on the right. The left and right lofts went up in a gradually
elevated configuration. And so you had three different choirs, and those choirs were the Senior choir, which sat in the center right behind the pulpit and sang primarily hymns, spirituals, anthems, occasionally oratorios—every Christmas they did the Messiah—the typical Protestant music of that time. On the left side you had the gospel choir which sang gospel music. And on the right side there was a young Peoples Choir which also performed hymns, anthems, and spiritual.

Crawford: All day long!

Wilson: [laughing] All day long, yes, because he was prominent in the church because of his voice and because of his position. And also, he was a very handsome man and a very sharp man, I mean, he dressed well and he looked well. I’ll show you a picture.

Crawford: Oh yes. We’ll put a picture in the book.

Wilson: The church was his means of being recognized for his skills, so he was very active in the church. He would contribute money—I thought it was an excessive amount of money—to the church, because we didn’t have a lot of money, but he believed in the idea of tithing, so he would give ten percent of his income. His income wasn’t that great, but it was more than most people had. So as a result, because he dressed well, because he spoke well, people assumed that his economic status was higher than it was. But it had to do with his aspirations and also the fact that he worked for some very prominent people who were very well known around the city in the time right after the war.

There was a certain amount of reflected glory projected by people who had those kinds of positions at the time. I mean, that’s all part of the legacy of racism, of slavery, and the post-slavery situation for African Americans in the urban centers at that time. He was in that generation that moved after World War I to the urban centers.

Crawford: No, I asked—

Wilson: —but it was because he had a certain amount of status within the Black community. That also built my admiration for him. I mean, he was my father—you’re always going to love your father just naturally, but then when he had some status from the community because he had this beautiful voice and he would sing and everybody would clap, you know I was very proud of him.

But getting back to the choirs because that’s important, and that’s important in understanding me. In this church, as I said, there was a wide range of social status. There were people who were relatively wealthy—at least, from the black perspective. Within the entire Black community, there were middle
class blacks, upper middle class blacks, lower class blacks, and people who just got off the train. I mean, there was the entire range, from people who, really were sharecroppers, really had struggled, really just barely made it, and the entire social range. You would see people come in and after a couple of years they became city slickers. Some of them became educated and were able to move on, and you could see this transformation going on. Growing up in that environment, I learned very quickly that you can’t look at a person and determine their intelligence or social status. I saw that that society was always in the process of changing. So many people, especially kids my own age who had just come from the South, had had a poor education.

Now, getting back to the church choir, because I only talked about the left side. There’s the gospel choir—let me say a couple words about gospel music. This is something I learned over the years, as a person who really became the scholar and a real serious student of African American music. At that time, gospel music—and I’m talking about the forties because I was born in ’37, and my memory, probably six, seven, I remember. I remember that at that time, the gospel chorus was hit or miss. That is, some of the people could sing brilliantly. They sang in a very traditional and powerful manner that went back to the early spirituals, and some of them were very good musicians, and some of them weren’t.

But you also had status associated with certain kinds of music at that time. Though most of the people in the congregation were either first or second and sometimes third generation migrants from the South, some of the people related to the music in different ways. The senior choir sang spirituals, and there was a big difference between the old expression of spirituals and the new gospel music. The spirituals seem to be the reservoir of a lot of the basic qualities of the culture, you know, and everybody knew the spirituals. You learned them from hearing people sing them as they worked, or just sing them as my father would sing all the time; we would learn them that way, but we also learned them in church.

Because this was a formal church, the senior choir would give a concert and they would sing—maybe half the music or a significant portion of it would be spirituals—the arranged spirituals that were performed by the Fisk Jubilee Singers,—a tradition that was established initially in the 1870s. So you had this tradition, which was really supported in the intellectual centers—the African American intellectual centers of that day, in the formal way, the African American colleges, traditional black colleges and universities. Because following the Fisk Jubilee Singers, once they were successful in raising money, every school said, “Oh, we’ve got to have a group and call them the Jubilee something or the choir,” and they would tour around. People still do that. The Morehouse Glee Club, for example, still travels here, there, there, there. The Howard University Choir—

Crawford: Now they’re in Europe, everywhere in Europe.
Wilson: Sure. That tradition still goes on, but that meant I was able to hear that. Since my father went to a traditional black college—he went to the Arkansas Baptist College in Little Rock, Arkansas, he had performed in that tradition, so he was a direct personal link to that. So he knew all kinds of spirituals from a choral point of view, but he also knew them as a soloist. So you have the gospel choir singing, not spirituals, but gospel music, which is a 20th century development group, which has been influenced by popular music in some ways, but also is rooted in the old spiritual tradition. At the same time you have the senior choir singing more formal spirituals and then singing hymns and anthems and oratorios, and so forth. Then you had the third choir, which was a young people’s choir. And that was a young people’s choir—this was for people ages about fourteen, fifteen, adolescents up to about—you could stay in there until you were twenty, twenty-one, or even older than that. That was the third choir that was singing.

So you had the senior choir, which was primarily older people but occasionally some young people, and this was the best choir. I mean, this was usually—there were people that had good voices, some people were trained as soloists, and they would give the big music concerts. The gospel choir, which would sing on some Sundays but it was always sitting there, and then all the mass choirs would sing together, and then you had the young people’s choir.

Now, then you also had another choir, which didn’t sit in the stands but sat up in the balcony up on the other side, the children’s choir. The children’s choir was for kids age six or five, until maybe twelve or thirteen, when they could move into the young people’s choir. My first musical memory of singing in a choir was the children’s choir, and because we had started at age seven, starting to play music and so forth, I and all my sisters, I mean, it was obligatory, “You sing in the children’s choir. You go to church, you sing in the children’s choir.” But because I was playing the piano and advancing, before long they would say—and I had a sister, I had three sisters. One sister was five years older than I am; she’s deceased now. My first sister—let me give you their names, before I get any further. My first oldest sister’s name was Gloria Eunice Wilson. My second sister was Alma Jean [Wilson], but Alma Jean died at age six. I can’t remember what the disease was, but she died prematurely at age six. I remember the funeral, though, because that was my first real direct exposure with death. She was maybe three years older than me. I must have been three or four, because that’s one of my first memories of going to this very traumatic funeral.

Crawford: What was it?

Wilson: I’ve forgotten what the disease was that she had. It was one of those childhood diseases or something, and she died. It wasn’t that she was suffering a long time but she had an attack of this and so after a short period of time she died. And with the shock of it, you know, of course my parents were very upset—as
a child you really remember that. That’s one of my first memories—the funeral of my sister.

Crawford: That would be one of my questions.

Wilson: —and people were singing, and the music, and it was sad, and people cried.

Wilmot: She was the closest one to you also, in age, because the other one was younger than you were.

Wilson: That’s right. The oldest one was five years older, and this one was maybe two or three years older than me. I had another sister, and then she died at six. Then I had the other sister who was a year older than me. Her name is Marian. Well, first, the second sister’s name was Alma Jean Wilson. My third sister’s name was Marian Geraldine Wilson. Of course, her current name is Marian Geraldine Palmer. My youngest sister’s name was Barbara Joyce Wilson, and her current name is Barbara Washington; that’s her married name. Now, the second sister died when I was only about four years old, but I grew up with the first two, and then when the one who was my last sister came along—and she is four years younger than me, I was a third child. Okay, so there was one, two, three—I being the third child, and not the fourth. So Barbara was—the youngest child in the Wilson family.

Wilmot: So you were all in the children’s choir.

Wilson: We were all in the children’s choir. The children’s choir would sing, you know, children’s church music, such as—“Jesus Loves Me” and there were special little arrangements for the children’s choir. But we would have rehearsals every Saturday. Going to church choir rehearsal was an important part of the day. At one o’clock we would get the streetcar public service and go downtown. Now that going downtown was important because my father, during the war, because of his education and because during the war there was a great need for labor in everything, and because a lot of people—all the eligible men who were of the right age were involved in the war. He was born in 1905, so he was too young for World War I and a little bit on the old side for World War II. Because he was close to forty, at least when it started, he really wasn’t drafted during the war. But, he was able to make great economic advances because he got a job at the post office. For black people to work at the post office was a major step economically. I mean, that was a good job. Because it was a government job, you had benefits. The salary was consistent, and it exceeded the salary you made working in private service, as a butler, maid and that kind of thing, which is what most people did, or as a porter or dishwasher, and any of those other menial jobs.

So, during World War II, he got a job working at the post office. His position that he got at the post office was as a railway mail clerk, which meant he traveled around the country riding in the mail cars and, you know, throwing
the mail. So, he had to learn a scheme—there was a rigorous exam that you had to take. I remember two things very strongly about that. Number one, he had to travel a lot because—it goes back to the old 1890’s days where the mail comes from one city to another. You pick up mail in one city and you drive along, you know, a hook catches the bag of mail, and you take it into a mail car. Then you have mail clerks and they are literally sorting the new mail, so by the time it gets to the next town, it’s all ready to go, and they throw it in the bags and the hook in the new city catches it.

Crawford: What a great system.

Wilson: Yes, so that’s what they did. But there were two required things: you had to learn the mail scheme, so you had to be able to look at a letter and quickly know which bag to toss it in. Then the next thing you had to do was you had to carry a gun.

Crawford: Huh.

Wilson: Now, the reason why you had to carry a gun was,—and this goes back to the Jesse James days, you know. The crooks knew that there was money sometimes in the mail, and there were checks and everything else, so they would occasionally rob a train, I mean, back in the nineteenth century. They didn’t do that in the nineteen twenties and thirties, but occasionally it happened.

Wilmot: Still a little lawless.

Wilson: That’s right. So the railway mail clerks had to have guns.

Wilmot: There might be other reasons why you might need to protect yourself as well.

Wilson: That’s right. So the fact that he had a gun, you know—“and I’d never seen a gun in a house”—it was amazing to me that there was a gun, there was a weapon that could shoot and kill people, and that my dad had to carry this. So, there was a little concern. But, to be perfectly honest, there was both a fascination with the fact that this is something that he has on this train and he’s going all over the country-sometimes he’s in Washington, sometimes he’s in the South, sometimes he’s in the north east—you know, wherever. He would usually go for four or five days. He’d go on one train, and he would just go and work, and then he’d come home, then have a couple days off, then he’d take off again. That was sort of the normal routine during World War II. That was his normal routine.

But there was also this gun, this symbol of power and authority, which was also intriguing, and so certainly, our life was transformed. Now, because of that, his salary was pretty good. He was making good money then and he was able to buy a new house. Before we were renting in different areas in St.
Louis. In St. Louis’s most urban areas were segregated so the majority of the places were in the predominantly black area. But things were constantly changing so—

Wilmot: What were those neighborhoods called, for someone who doesn’t know St. Louis?

Wilson: Ah, they were called—let’s see. There were different names. There were some areas that were called De Ville—we didn’t live in that area, but we lived—it was just—. Well, the city was divided sort of in areas that were closer to the central part, which was downtown near the river, and that’s how the city developed. The river, and then, the more the municipal places are there, and then as you move out it’s more and more towards the suburbs. Well, this was sort of midtown. Midtown—it was called Midtown.

Wilmot: Where you rented.

Wilson: Where we rented, initially. My first memories—my first school was Riddick School, and that was in Midtown near Sarah and Evans. Riddick School was near to Sarah on Evans, at 4100 Evans, I remember that. The first address that I had to remember as a little kid when I went to school was 4204 Evans, which was a block down from the school. I’ll always remember that, you know, as a little kid, “You learn this number! You learn your numbers,” so I had to learn 4204 Evans. I remember that fifty, sixty—well almost sixty—well, I’m sixty-five, so sixty years later I remember 4204—that was the address of my house

Crawford: It’s like your first telephone number. It was like a Sylvan or an Oak or a Birch. Remember that?

Wilson: Exactly, exactly, and ours was Forest, Forest or Rosedale, or something. Instead of numbers it was Forest one and so forth.

Crawford: You miss so much by just having numbers; we had word exchanges.

Wilson: Exactly, word exchange, you had to do that. So anyway, I’ve been rambling now—

Wilmot: We’ve touched a lot of different areas, and there’s so much that’s very rich in what you’re saying that I would just love to slow us down.

Wilson: Okay, okay.

Crawford: Your mother, she’s a big influence and you didn’t give us her name.

Wilson: Okay, let’s talk about the mother, but let me finish this story before I forget.
Wilmot: About the neighborhood where you rented and the neighborhood where you owned.

Wilson: Okay, that’s right. We lived in Midtown, a predominantly black neighborhood in the middle of town. At that time I guess you would probably call it a middle class black neighborhood and the whole mix that you had there. But during the war, because my father worked for the post office, he was able to buy his first house and he bought the house on Page Boulevard, which was closer, outside of the main boundaries. Usually the areas in which blacks lived in those days were constrained by a street, and everybody knew this street—if you lived on the other side of that street, you’re out of the black neighborhood, if you lived on this side. This was because of both the real estate practices, which limited blacks from buying in certain areas, and custom, which was supported by the law.

But there were years during the war, during all of the war, if you look at American history, social norms change then because there are other things that are more demanding, and one of the changes that occurred during World War II was the boundaries that restricted the black neighborhood. The boundary at that point was a street called Taylor, which was in the 4500 west. The city is like a straight grid going from the river out to the end of the city limits. We lived near that limit in the 4200 of Evans; that’s one of the first numbers that I remember. Then my father bought a house on the 4800 of Page, which was a predominantly white—not only predominantly white, a predominantly Jewish neighborhood, and not only predominantly Jewish, a predominantly orthodox Jewish neighborhood.

Wilmot: Wow.

Wilson: Now, I didn’t know that until much later on. This happened in 1943 so I’m six years old now and had just started kindergarten in 1942. I remember the day and remember 1943; I remember the new neighborhood, a very nice neighborhood. There were nice lawns and so forth. The old neighborhood we lived in was decent by today’s standards anyway, but this was nicer, the homes were nicer. And instead of having many people rent a two family—one a flat and a two-family flat—these were single family homes, but it was still a two-family home. So my father bought this house at 4851 Page Street. There were two families so we could rent out the upstairs and we lived in the downstairs.

Wilmot: Who did you rent to?

Wilson: We rented to other black people there. I remember the whole story. This is another thing that’s all part of it, the story about how he was able to buy the house. He met a real estate agent who was white, who was liberal in persuasion, and who saw this neighborhood changing, and saw that some of the more unscrupulous real estate agents were doing the traditional things that
they had done, that had happened in Harlem and any other major urban city in
the United States. That is, when this happens, then “white flight” begins to
occur and the whites are really desperate to leave, and so they’ll sell low.
Then, because blacks are interested, the real estate agent would take that
house that they bought for a relatively low price, which was undervalued, and
triple the price if they could, to sell it to the blacks.

So this practice was common and that meant only the blacks who had some
money were able to move there. I mean, the average person couldn’t move
into a neighborhood like this. That was one of the things that impeded
mobility outside of the black urban centers. But if you found a decent real
estate agent, which my father—I don’t know how he met this person. I think it
was somebody that he knew or he knew through the people he worked for; I
think that’s what happened. I remember this man, whose name was a Mr.
Patton, and he worked with my dad, and they arranged for him to buy this
house. It was a very nice house and it was very nice of them. My dad was very
pleased.

Wilmot: When you say arranged, what does that mean?

Wilson: I think what he did was to help him get through the barriers that normally
would have impeded the process.

Wilmot: Right.

Wilson: What he did was to—it was bought in my father’s name but if—at that time,
you know, racism was pretty obvious. If somebody didn’t want to sell to you
they would say, “No, I’m not going to sell it to you.” But if the real estate
agent says, “I’ve got a buyer and this buyer’s willing to pay so much,” then
the sellers didn’t necessarily know who the buyers were. And so I think he
helped to facilitate the transaction and to get past the kinds of things that
would have impeded the seller.

Wilmot: Was your family, then, the first African American family in that community?

Wilson: We were not the first African American family, we were the second. There
was another family a block or so away that lived there; they had lived there a
few years earlier. This particular person was also a mechanic and so he
provided a service. He had his shop right there behind his house and—I think
people in the neighborhood thought this was convenient to have this mechanic
there, so he did it. But my father had saved money because of his railway
clerk job and was able to purchase a house.

So that’s the father side, and I tell you that story to establish the context of my
childhood, but also to give you a picture of my father. He was a person who
had reasonably good business sense and at the same time was a very good
musician.
Wilmot: There are so many questions that come out of your description of your father. I just want to stop a minute in this neighborhood that you moved into, and I’m wondering if your playmates at that time were your neighbors?

Wilson: Sure. Oh yeah, there are many stories; I could talk forever about that. Remember I’m six years old, we move in this house, and it’s a predominantly a Jewish neighborhood—not everybody but predominantly. The reason why I realized that is that on one corner down the street there was a large temple, and then around the corner there was another temple, and then up the street there was another. There was an Orthodox—because people are Orthodox, they wore the beards and the black and all that, and we would see these people and that was different. We hadn’t seen that much of that and so we are sort of looking at that. Then there were other people who we subsequently discovered were Jewish but they went to another church, which was a larger—there were the Orthodox, the Reformed, and the Conservatives. So it was mainly Orthodox and Reformed. That meant most of the people around us were Jewish.

We lived in a two-family flat, and then there was another—there were three two-family flats that must have been developed by a developer about the same time thirty years earlier, and then there was a big four-family flat. The streets were in good shape, the houses were—they had beautiful trees and flowers, but it was a large street. There was a streetcar that ran on the street and on one side there were some commercial places, but then there was a little park between the streetcar tracks and the other side of the street. Then, on the other side of that park was where there were several residences or houses. We lived in one of those houses, so we actually lived on a large street.

In the two-family flat that was up the street, there were several children. I remember there was a Herbert and Nelly Singleton—the first white kids that we knew, and you know, kids are kids, so we started playing with each other. Because of the age, my sisters were actually closer to the age of Nelly and Herbert, their older brother, was older, so I didn’t really—I mean, we would talk and play a little bit, but he was a little bit too old for me. But, you know, they were the first kids that we knew because they lived two doors down, and so we knew each other. Eventually, they moved away and we never heard from them again, but they were friends. Then there were other kids around. Then as more black kids, over the period of years—as I said, I was six years old, I was in first grade when we moved there and by the time I graduated from grammar school, eighth grade, the neighborhood was about three-fourths black.

By the time I graduated from high school it must have been about 80 percent black. So it just changed over a period of time, which meant, because the schools were segregated at that time, it meant that the education was directly affected, in a sense. Remember the first school I said I went to, the kindergarten school, was at this other house, was in that other neighborhood,
Riddick School. And that was what—4200s, this was 4800s, this was what, six blocks away, but six really large blocks. I mean these are long blocks, these are really long blocks.


Wilson: That’s right, and so to go to school, because the only school we could go to were black schools, we had to go all the way down to Riddick. Now, but in order to get to Riddick I had to pass four other public schools. So, to go to the black school I had to pass four other schools where the white kids went. And I had to pay for it, because in order to get to school I had to get the bus. I had to ride the bus. So bussing—I’m your original bus kid, and we had to pay for it. [laughs] We had to pay to go to segregated schools as a direct consequence of where we lived, that was interesting. But because the neighborhood changed each year, another school would be closer, so I actually went to five different grammar schools because of that. I went to Riddick first, and then the next year the black population was a little bit closer, so then I went to another school, Marshall. Then I went to Cote Brilliant School, and then I went to Washington School—these names are not that important—but finally, I went to Cupples School in the eighth grade. That was a school that was around the corner from me that I should have been going to all the time, but I couldn’t go there because of the official segregation policy of the St. Louis Board of Education.

Crawford: So it became black.

Wilson: After African Americans became the majority population, then they would change the school, from a white school to a black school. But since it was a predominantly white school when I started there, I couldn’t go to any of those schools. So we had to simply walk past those schools or in the morning get the bus. Usually we would get the bus going east, and since Riddick was further away would get the bus coming back. I think in those days there were passes you could buy and three kids could ride on a pass, or something like that, if they were under the age of twelve, so I’m sure we did something like that.

Wilmot: I have one question about, at that time as a child did you encounter different traditions of music that stem from Orthodox Jewish tradition?

Wilson: Not really, because though we knew kids who were Jewish, we didn’t have any contact with the religion at all. It really was verboten to go into a church. I mean, if you were black you didn’t go into a white church, if you were white you didn’t go into a black church unless you were invited.

Crawford: Was that specified or you just knew that that was—?

Wilson: It was practice, it was practice. And occasionally, during election time a white politician might come to a black church, but he was escorted there or invited
there by the minister. “Okay, the mayor’s coming,” or somebody, because this was a large black church with a lot of people, reasonably educated. We had this wide social class spread, but a lot of educated people were there. So occasionally, during a political campaign or something, there might be a white person who comes to the church, but usually they would stay for a short time. They would sit for part of the service and they would speak bitterly. Then they would go to the next church. But blacks going to white churches, you—rarely saw. The exception were the Catholic churches. Catholic churches, though there were all black Catholic churches even back in those days, most of the priests were white and most of the nuns were white. There were exceptions however.

My wife is Catholic—that’s another interesting story,—but the Catholicism part of it was an interesting thing and it relates to the whole—American history. As I think about American history and my life, there are so many examples of things that just happened that I didn’t quite understand until I became a serious student and then I began to think, “Oh, that’s why this happened.”

Crawford: We tend to just accept what is instead of good and bad.

Wilson: Sure, that’s right. There were Catholic churches in my neighborhoods, in the old neighborhood and then in the new neighborhood. They were more integrated in terms of the congregation. Usually, there would be white priests. There would be whites who lived in that area, and they would go to the church and blacks would also go to that church. And then there were some churches that were predominantly black, but most of the churches were predominantly white. In the Protestants Churches I didn’t know of any integrated churches until later on, by the time I was in college—the Unitarians, which was the vanguard. In that Church you would commonly have integrated congregations, but not in most Protestant denominations.

Crawford: So where did that stem from?

Wilson: That stemmed from slavery. The whole business about proselytizing African American slaves was a very interesting period in American history. Right in the eighteenth century and nineteenth century, there were still arguments asserting that people of African descent were somehow subhuman, and they were the link between animals and human beings. The Darwin theory was distorted and people would say, “Well, then you’ve got the blacks who are sort of between monkeys, and then you’ve got whites.” And then you had pseudo-scientists writing books and books about how the black brain is different from the white brain, and so forth and so on.

Crawford: But the fact that the Catholic churches were integrated?
Wilson: Oh yes. The reason why the Catholic churches were integrated is that most of the Catholics, the European Catholics came from France, came from the Latin countries, predominantly the Latin European society, which was predominantly Catholic. When they came to the New World, depending on who they were, they approached it in different ways. On the one hand you had the Portuguese, who wherever they went, would say—“Get the gold and get out quick.” Get the money, do it, don’t try to develop a little Portugal. Just go and get the money and get the raw materials, what you want. Call it all Portugal and just subject everybody to—” The Portuguese who were particularly heinous, they were terrible.

Crawford: Awful.

Wilson: The Dutch were pretty bad too, okay? Then you had the English who said, “Break it, anything under the crown, we are going to make a little England.” So wherever they went, they tried to make it England and coming along with it was the educational system. So, wherever they went they provided the education.

The French brought the religion, but depending on where they were, they might have brought more or less of the culture, you know. But because they brought the religion, the French and many of the Catholics from—certainly the French Catholics, and to a certain degree some of the other Catholics, and the Spanish particularly—the Spanish were certainly more prominent. They brought the idea you take your religion, as a matter of fact, you send your religion first. So you send Junipero Serra first and you establish all these missions, and you tell all the Native Americans, “Look, you know, you’ve got to come to God,” and that becomes the main thing. Then behind the religions comes the military, and then behind that comes the settlers who are making the money. By then the indigenous people are pacified until you are able to control them.

Whether they thought of it originally that way depends on your perspective. But the point was that the ideology was that, “We will proselytize everybody, we will bring God to everybody, we will bring the Catholic Church to everybody.” So you bring them all in and you make them Catholic. As a matter of fact, if they don’t become Catholic, then you deal with them in a tough way. So they had that approach. Protestants on the other hand, especially the English Protestants and so forth, were coming from a position of being persecuted themselves and they were more.

Crawford: That makes perfect sense.

Wilson: Right. So they don’t want these other people unless you—and they’re not sure whether you really belong anyway but, “We want to bring our world and we are going to protect our world, and we are going to do it our way.” So that’s one of the reasons why you have the two different positions. And that’s one of
the reasons why, when we were talking about the education being integrated and so forth, that’s why anywhere where you have this Roman Latin Catholic church, you have this kind of more open attitude in some ways, and in other ways not. But because of that you have a much more open thing.

The other thing that happened is that—and this is very complicated—but the phenomenon of Louisiana and New Orleans, you know, and in throughout the Caribbean and throughout much of South America—certainly Brazil and a lot of the Caribbean places. You not only had blacks and whites, you had blacks, whites, and mulattos. That was because the French code of 1724—Code Noir—made it possible for any white settler—because the French and the Spanish to large degrees, when they came there they wanted to make the money, get the money, stay here for long periods of time, make the money and go back.

Crawford: And marry.

Wilson: Marry, yes. So they were here by themselves. They weren’t bringing in French women or Spanish women except for prostitutes. But they were here, and so whoever the other women were, they would just take those women, “Okay, you’re with me now.” Because human nature being what it is, they would say, “Well, look, I don’t know if I want to treat my offspring as a white slave, so why can’t I make them free?” Eventually in 1724 they said, “Okay you can.” If you want to make them free you can make them free.” So you have—especially the French—you have this idea—the Portuguese were different and the Spanish were different, but the French were very clear about this, so that if they said, “This offspring is free,” it’s free. Then you have a whole class of people growing up who are half white, half black, or one third or fourth. This whole idea about maroons, octoroons, you know, the different degree of white blood, which the French had down to a very exact point.

That legacy, of course, is reflected in the “Gens de Couleur” in New Orleans and in all of the French colonial empire in the Caribbean. Therefore you have—and the most dramatic place of course is in Haiti, where you had wars not only between the colonialist French and the maroons (i.e. the blacks who ran away into the mountains) the blacks there, but between the blacks, the whites and the mulattos. Because much of what we think of as part of the island, you know, part of Haiti, part of the Dominican Republic, a lot of that section is the Dominican Republic, which was really dominated by the mulattos. So you have that legacy: mulattos sometimes fighting against the blacks and against the French, sometimes fighting with the blacks against the French, sometimes fighting with the French against the blacks, so you had this sort of mixture. But it also was immensely complicated because genetics being what it is, [laughing] you never could tell who was who sometimes. It was really a complicated situation.
That legacy still exists in the former French Louisiana territories. I mean, you have some of that legacy. That’s why, in terms of the races in the United States, it’s so awkward, because there are many people, if you have ever been to New Orleans or lived in New Orleans—and not only New Orleans but other places like Charleston, North Virginia and other places, where you cannot look at a person and tell what their race is—you just can’t. And that worked both ways, sometimes to the advantage, sometimes to the disadvantage. The literary notion of “the tragic mulatto,” which is one theme that’s prominent in early African American literature—one sees that as a legacy of that. But all that’s background. I don’t want to go too far with that.

Crawford: I’m curious about what you said about the Catholic congregations in St. Louis. Did that strike you as odd? How did you look at that?

Wilson: It really didn’t strike me much at the time—but, being a Protestant, I didn’t pay it too much attention.

Crawford: It was different, it was just different.

Wilson: It was different, until it became very clear—I mean, I knew about it because I had friends who went to Catholic schools and went to Catholic churches, and those churches were sometimes integrated, and our churches never were. But the whole nature of the service was different. I had an uncle who was Catholic. As a matter of fact, my sister who died was six years old and I remember this when she died. Shortly after she died or right before she died, my father had a good friend who was Catholic and he wanted to make sure she was baptized, and she was baptized a Catholic. He got a priest to come to her and baptize her, so that was my first introduction to that. And this good friend of my father said that he—I remember him once taking me to a Catholic church because I was curious about it. Because occasionally in a while you would see these massive churches looking like they’re castles out of Europe. You would open the door and it was dark and the colors were different, and it was a totally different. It struck me as being much more mystical, you know.

And so he took me once to a Catholic church, and I was really fascinated with the incense that they had, and the priests and the robes and the colors and the lights coming through the colored glass, and the chant and all of that ceremony, which struck me—I had never heard anything like that. That really struck me as really “Oh, very mystical,” and “That’s heavenly,” but in a different way.

Crawford: You didn’t want to go there; you weren’t attracted to it.

Wilson: I was attracted to it, but not—I was attracted to it because of the ritual. I always loved ritual and I loved the fact that this was different and it was ritual. And at the time, I must have been nine or ten then, and at the time I remember
I used to like to read the encyclopedias about knights and nobles, and things like that. This sort of religion seemed like it was related to that world, and so I was fascinated by it. I was attracted to it because I was fascinated by it. On the other hand, the church that I went to, I was so much accustomed to the way things were done, and that seemed more religious to me. The other seemed fascinating and mystical. I was intrigued, really intrigued by it because it was so different, but I wasn’t converted by it. But I didn’t know enough about it to know one way or another.

Wilmot: I had one question, Olly, about St. Louis. I’m trying to understand where your church, the First Baptist Church, fits in the constellation of black churches in St. Louis. I’m trying to just understand if it was one of the powerhouse churches in the way that the Allen Temple is in Oakland or was it one of three, or was it one of—?

Wilson: It was similar; the ideal was like that. The Allen Temple ideal is similar to this ideal, in which one looks at the church and the church is supposed to serve the community. If you’ve got a large congregation and people come and people give money, because they like what happens at church, you’ve got good choirs and sermons—people go. But also, then, one of the first things you do is build an educational building. I remember when my church built an educational building, bought the property next door, and built an educational building. The educational building was to support the programs in the church, and that was, you know, all these youth programs that we talked about: the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, different kinds of clubs. There were different units within the church and so forth, so that people would come and get to know each other. But it also had health programs for the community and so forth.

Sometimes they were very simple things. For example, for most of my life, every Christmas we went Christmas caroling, and we went Christmas caroling downtown. Now, I started to say this earlier but I don’t think I made it clear. I said the neighborhood in which I lived in was Midtown, okay? The neighborhood I lived in initially was Midtown, where I went to Riddick School. The tougher neighborhood was called Downtown. That was where—it was close to what you would call the slums. It was tougher there, especially in the black neighborhoods. If you went down a little further you would get to the big business areas and so forth, and that’s the bustling urban center.

But in the Downtown area, you would have a lot of churches, the same syndromes that you see in any large black community. On every corner there’s a storefront church; there are many storefront churches. That’s where gospel music was really born. So you have the storefront churches and you have liquor stores, you know. So you have liquor stores and churches, a great preponderance of those, and then the housing and the despair and everything that you see, all of the pathology that you see in the cities associated with slums and that kind of decadence, the decaying city, you found in the Downtown.
So my church, the church I grew up with, the First Baptist Church, because it was established in the 1830s, was downtown. We would come from our neighborhood to go Downtown. That physical act of going from our neighborhood, which was first Midtown, and then when we moved out further west. As a matter of fact, people referred to it. If you were out of a certain area, past this street called Taylor, it was referred to as “out west,” which meant those are nicer houses, closer to the suburbs, it’s economically a little bit better and so forth. It was a statement to live in that neighborhood and to go to this church. But because the church represented everything, as I said, as opportunities grew, more and more people were able to have better houses during the war, and so they still would go to that church. So you had that church representing an ideal. The Booker T. Washington self-help principle was something that was really something that everybody talked about. You had the church reaching out, like Allen Temple has. Oh, Allen Temple, of course, has learned over the years, and they do it better, but still the ideal of that church was then to have self-help and be involved in community activities.

Wilmot: You mention Booker T. Washington, and I just want to quickly pull descriptions related to this. There are these competing schools, W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington. In your family was there a kind of race consciousness and awareness of these dialogues happening out in the world?

Wilson: Oh, very much, very much. I don’t know if—it would depend on who you talked to, but certainly, certainly, that idea of the dichotomy between the Booker T. Washington approach and the W.E.B. DuBois approach was something which we were aware of. It wasn’t articulated quite as clearly until later on, but still we were aware of that. And we were very much part of—because my father had gone to college, that’s why I mention that—of what we considered ourselves to be “race people.” That term “race people,” which was a term used a lot in the twenties and thirties, meant that people who were conscious of being African American and who were committed to fighting for full rights as full citizens and nothing less than that was acceptable. So that was deeply internalized in people of my generation. And my father’s generation, having been close to being a college graduate and hence subscribing to the notions of the W.E.B. DuBois idea; “Do as much, learn as much, be the best that you can be and demand nothing less than full rights.” That was very much the strong ideal that was internalized and reflected in a number of different ways. So the upwardly mobile, the strivers, you know, and the Harlem notion of the striving mentality, was very much part of my parents mentality, which they passed on to us, and everybody I knew had the same kind of mentality.

Wilmot: What did that mean in concrete ways in your family life?

Wilson: Well, what it meant is that education is the key. It meant, “Hey, there is no question about it, you absolutely will be educated, you absolutely will go to
college, you absolutely will beg, borrow and steal; you will do whatever it takes in order to become an educated person. People have died taking too much—it’s no choice, it’s no choice, you will.” It was that. I can’t even imagine not graduating from high school, because it was so stark, “Either you do this or you’re going to do that.”

Crawford: Both parents presented that to you?

Wilson: Oh yes. We haven’t talked about my mother, that’s another whole story, but that view was absolutely held very strongly.

Wilmot: When you say, “Either you are going to do this or you are going to do that,” what was the alternative?

Wilson: The alternative was you’re going to work as a menial for the rest of your life. You’re going to be somebody’s cook, maid, servant, cleaning house, or porter, or working in a factory, working in a steel mill with the hot steel popping on you, and all of that stuff. It was stark, it was very stark. It was very clear too that you’d better do whatever you can do because the alternative is not pretty—none of that business about you’re going to find yourself. “Find yourself for what? You’d better get a job.” [laughter] It was very, very, very pragmatic. Now that part pulled in the Booker T. Washington part. The W.E.B. DuBois was that “Be the best you can be, don’t take anything second hand, you must demand first. You can be as smart as you want to be. You’re naturally endowed. You have inalienable rights. You have to demand them, you also have to demand much of yourself. You can do no less than your very best under every circumstance. You have an obligation.” You have an obligation as a person, but you also have an obligation as a descendent of slaves. And as a consequence of that, when you think about all the things that your ancestors went through, you cannot do anything less but be the very best that you can be under all circumstances. So that was deeply, deeply inculcated.

Wilmot: Who was the obligation to?

Wilson: The obligation was to yourself, but also to the race; that’s what the race meant, you see, the whole idea of “You are part of something larger than you.” There are negative aspects of that. You cannot go to the downtown theaters. If you lived in certain places you cannot vote. As a matter of fact, if you go to the South, you can be lynched for nothing. I remember the lynching of—you probably remember this, Caroline. You probably don’t know this unless you read about it, but—Emmet Till. You ever heard of Emmet Till? I was a teenager when this murder happened and there were vivid pictures of his swollen head and this person just being murdered for nothing. I think they said he had an evil eye; he looked at a white woman.

Crawford: Everybody saw that.
Wilson: Oh yes, it was horrible. To me, I mean that meant that could have been me because everybody had relatives in the South. My father is the first generation northern person, and was part of the “great migration” thing and all that meant. And though I was born in St. Louis, I know where my folks are from and, you know, when my grandmother died, we went to the South, and we went on a public conveyance. I mean, I can tell you a lot about segregation in which—in St. Louis at the time, there were no “Water” signs, there was no “Back of the Bus” business in St. Louis. Because Missouri is a compromise state; it depends on where you are in Missouri. [laughing] I mean, if you are in the boot heel of Missouri you might as well be in Arkansas, Mississippi, or Alabama—it was clear segregation. If you are in the urban centers, St. Louis, Kansas City, there aren’t any signs but you know there are certain places you can go and certain places you can’t go. The downtown movies we could never go to as an African American growing up. The better restaurants downtown you couldn’t go, and there weren’t signs. It’s just that if you walked in somebody would say, “We don’t serve you.” And point to those signs, “We reserve the right to refuse service to anyone,” that’s what that meant.
[laughing] It meant that if you walk in there, you will be asked to leave quickly, unceremoniously. Also that meant that—and when I was young it was clear—“You can’t come in here.”

Nobody told us the whole history but they said, you know—we went to the black theaters, which were closer to the black neighborhoods. We would read the newspaper and we would see a brand new movie is going to be at the St. Louis Theater, Missouri Theater, down on Grand Street, the big grand promenade, but we couldn’t go there. And it didn’t take us long. I think maybe once I may have asked or somebody may have asked—we got the message really quick that you just couldn’t go to those movies. Unlike the South where they had the whites in the orchestra seats and the blacks had only seats in the balcony. In St. Louis it was none of that; it was either a white theater or a black theater, and if it was a white theater you couldn’t go to it, so you learned that early.

What happened later on though, because I’m living through all this great social change, as this begins to change you begin to see—people begin to probe and things begin to change. In certain respects, that was even more complex: you didn’t know—because sometimes you might go in places and you would be accepted and other times you’d go and you wouldn’t, and you couldn’t figure it out. And I had some experiences like that. Let me jump ahead a while just to tell you this experience.

Crawford: That’s okay, we’ll bring you back.

Wilson: I went to Washington University in St. Louis and this was in 1955; I was a freshman in 1955. In 1954 Washington University was a segregated institution. It was the best institution, a high quality institution, people sometimes used to refer to it as the Harvard of the Midwest, but it was a
segregated institution. Now, ’54, the Supreme Court decision, bam! That Supreme Court decision changed a lot of things for me because I was in high school going to an all-black school. I lived in this neighborhood which was still—by this time it was maybe 75 to 80 percent black, because I’m a junior in high school. The high school that I went to, Sumner High School, was in the Midtown area where I used to live a long time ago. There were two other high schools, public high schools that were closer to me in walking distance for me, but they were segregated until 1954.

In 1954, the St. Louis Board of Education said, “Okay, the Supreme Court said we have to integrate.” So they said, “If you live in this neighborhood you can go to the school.” But I’m a junior in high school, I’m going to Sumner High School, I’m having the best time of my life.

Crawford: Big school?

Wilson: Oh, big school. I’m having a good time, I don’t want to go there, especially when it was, “Some of those people don’t want you to come there,” so I didn’t want to go there. Besides I’m a junior, I’m having too much fun, you know. I’m into band, I’m doing this, I’m doing this, I’m playing this. Hey, I was perfectly happy where I was. So I graduated in 1955, and when I graduated in 1955, I end up going to Washington University. And Washington University was—as I said, there were, I guess, in that freshman class of 7,000 students, there were about sixteen blacks, most of them from St. Louis. But because I was from St. Louis I was saved by the fact that there was a social life still in St. Louis. So I could still be cool or live the way I wanted to live in St. Louis, but there was an intellectual life—there was a life inside the school. So I went there and—

Wilmot: So you lived your social life outside of college?

Wilson: Social life—because I wasn’t living in college, I’d catch the streetcar and go to school there, and then I would go home.

Wilmot: Which is really different than what people imagine college is for.

Wilson: That’s right, that’s right. So, I mean, I had my social life in St. Louis, I had the school life at Washington University. But once in a while it would still hit you and that sort of schism where—because, you know, getting back to W.E.B. DuBois, this whole business about the double consciousness of African Americans. One could extend that to almost anybody in any group, whether you’re Jewish or Irish American or German American or whatever, you have a loyalty and an affinity to the things that are associated to your culture. Then you also understand you are part of a broader culture, and you learn how to deal with that, you know, inside the group and outside the group.
Crawford: You didn’t have to change, you didn’t have to move from, what was it, Sumner High School to—?

Wilson: No, I didn’t have to change. I was given the option, I could change, but I chose not to change because I was having too much fun in high school, and I did not want to go to a new school where I didn’t know anybody for one year. I wanted to do as the seniors had done before, and for me graduation was such a big deal. By then I’m president of the band, I’m president of the honor society—I’m doing this, I’m doing that. Hey, for me, your senior year was rewarding, exciting and fun.

Wilmot: From what I’ve read, that high school was such an amazing school. I understand not wanting to move.

Wilson: Yes, it was a great school. Dick Gregory, the comedian Dick Gregory, was a senior—

Crawford: Oh, I hope we go through every one. Grace Bumbrie—I’m very impressed, you were on the bus together, I read.

Wilson: Sure, we rode the streetcar together going to Washington University. That was when we were still in high school. Sociologically, things begin to change. Professor Lewis Hilton of the Music Department at Washington University, an excellent scholar and sensitive humanitarian, established a free Saturday morning class in music theory designed for gifted high school students who had planned to major in music in college. He was motivated to create this class because many talented musicians who attended Washington University had great difficulty in completing the Music Department’s challenging music theory curriculum. What was exceptional about this class was not only that the class was free, but that the invitation was extended to Black high schools as well as the White schools.

Crawford: Isn’t that outstanding? That’s so unusual.

Wilson: Many people, especially kids of my age who had recently come from the Deep South and had experienced poor education would, nevertheless, make important educational advancements if they really applied themselves. Suddenly, they were doing very well in their new urban environment. We had a great music program at the two major Black high schools. One was on one side of town, the other was on the other side, Downtown and Midtown: Downtown, Vashon High School; Midtown, Sumner High School. Notice they’re both named after abolitionists, as most black schools were. And because we were invited—and Grace was an outstanding contralto even then. People were, “Oh, she’s great,” and by then I was also a very good clarinetist.

Crawford: Even in high school you could tell she had a great voice?
Wilson: Oh yes, she was so good. She was singing something from Don Carlo, such as [singing] “O Don Fatale!”

Crawford: O Don Fatale!

Wilson: Oh yeah, she would sing that. And now, most of these kids in the school didn’t know anything about opera, but we recognized talent. She would get up there and sing and you’d go, “Wow, she can sing!”

Crawford: Oh, my goodness. It’s a big order—

Wilson: Oh my gosh, everybody would go, “Wow, this is great; she’s really good.” But remember this was a high school of 3,000 students. I mean this was a high school that was larger than most at the time.

Crawford: How amazing that all of you were pulled out and recognized.

Wilson: She was great. There are special stories, which we’ll get into.

Crawford: We’re not quite to high school yet, but I knew you did something with Dick Gregory and that’s interesting.

Wilson: Right. Well, Dick Gregory was a senior when I was in my freshman year. And he was an exceptional comedian even then. He had two things going for him. In a traditional, high school especially, you know, during adolescence, if you’re a good athlete or you’re a good entertainer, singer, comedian, musician, you’re immediately among the most popular people in the school, and he was both. He was a superb miler. He was a skinny guy, but he could run long distances and—I think at one time, he held the national high school record for running the mile. So, he was a track star, number one and number two, he also was a comedian and the school always had a big talent show. Man, there was always incredible talent in that talent show. But Dick Gregory was so good that they would turn over about a third of the show to him alone and he would satirize the school, the teachers, the principals, other students, and the gangs. He could say anything. He had immunity because he was such a popular guy. But he also was very socially conscious, even then, and he was also working with the NAACP. Schools were still segregated at that time.

Crawford: He was doing what with the NAACP?

Wilson: He was working with the NAACP to improve the problems at St. Louis’, two black high schools. They were so overcrowded that we had four lunch periods. I mean, some people would eat lunch at 10:30 AM and some people would eat lunch at 2:00 PM. It was that crazy because there were so many students—and they could only go to one of two high schools. They had all these students and not enough room in the lunchroom for all of them at once, so they would have three lunch periods. This meant that because of the over-crowdedness, the
NAACP and other organizations were agitating to build new schools. They were agitating for integration, too—but the focus was on these horrible conditions. We should have had more schools, particularly because the other schools in the neighborhood were designated for the White students were just sitting there, vacant. So, this was happening in my freshman year.

So because the NAACP—I’m sure the NAACP had something to do with it. But then there were student leaders who are also saying, “We should strike and we should boycott and we should march down to the Board of Education and demand more schools.” I was a freshman kid; I’m thirteen, fourteen years old, and so by that time they said, “March, engage in civil protests!” Dick Gregory was leading because he was a really popular guy and he was a senior and said, “We should do this!” All the sudden there were all signs around school saying, “Strike, 10:00 a.m.!”

Crawford: That’s very unusual.

Wilson: We didn’t know what the word strike really meant, but we did realize that it meant walking out and complaining about our condition, so we walked out of school. Everybody got together and if somebody tried to stop us we just pushed the person out of the way and walked on. Then we walked down to the Board of Education and demanded that we have more space. Then the next year we did [inaudible] have more space—this was the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, too.

Crawford: ’50.

Wilson: This was ’51, ’52. What happened is that the Board of Education turned over another school that used to be a white school to become a school for African Americans. They said, “Okay, this is going to be the auxiliary school for Sumner High School.” “We will call this—a school for freshmen, so all new Summer High School freshmen will start at this school.” Therefore we had a school full of freshmen. So that meant—we had the strike in the Fall semester of my freshman year. They turned over the new school in the Spring semester, so I had to go to this school that was called Bates, which was the Sumner High School Freshman School, in the second semester. And remember, I had this history of going to all these different schools, so here I’m going to still a different school. And I had been a freshman—and when you were a freshman in high school in those days you would be harassed just because you were a freshman. Then, I reach the second semester, and I go to Bates. Well, we are all freshmen there, so when we wanted to harass, we were just harassing each other. Then, for the sophomore year, I go back to Sumner High School, and though I’m a sophomore I’m still the new kid on the block, so we get harassed again. [laughter] So it’s like we were freshmen at least twice. At any rate, that was in those early years.
The story that I wanted to tell you about, because this gets back to something I was saying earlier about how one didn’t know where the borders were, where the boundaries were, and how economic or other factors can really determine them. When I went Washington University—I told you about there being so few blacks there. Out of 7,000 undergraduate students, maybe there were sixteen or something like that. Most of them were from St. Louis, sort of chosen from St. Louis, because the whole Jackie Robinson syndrome was in the background. You know, “Do your work, shut up, take it, you have to show people, you can’t be equal, you’ve got to be better, and so you’ve got to run harder, be smarter, succeed.” That attitude was deeply internalized in my view of myself. I’m in the band because I’m a music major and play clarinet; I went to college on a scholarship, so I’m playing the clarinet, and the band would travel around. It was fun playing in the band, and we’d have our shows at half time; that was all part of it.

Crawford: Well, you were already playing in clubs, weren’t you?

Wilson: Yes, I was playing piano in clubs, but also I assumed I was going to be a band director because my high school band director was a strong mentor.

Crawford: Those people were looked up to, teachers and bandleaders.

Wilson: Oh yes. And really talented people, they could do all kinds of things. There were two Black students in the band then and we usually played at football games and parades in town, but once we went up to Kansas City for something. I think there was a band concert or something. We go to Kansas City and I remember we had done whatever we had to do, and we were all hungry so they said, “Let’s go, there’s a little hamburger joint here, let’s everybody go in,” and I’m going with everybody else. We all go into this place, this little greasy spoon hamburger place, but that’s what kids like, so we ordered this hamburger. We went in and there must have been about fifteen of us from the school. I’m the only black there at this particular time. I’m with fifteen or sixteen white and we go into the place and we all order hamburgers. So fine, I get served. It’s not the kind of place I would have gone into by myself, but we were with other people and so we get hamburgers and pay our dollar, or whatever we paid in those days, and then go back to the hotel.

Later on in the evening people start acting silly. I guess some people start having a little beer and running up the halls; you know what college kids do in big floppy hotels. I wasn’t really interested in that so I sort of thing, but then, I got hungry again, and there wasn’t anybody to go to dinner with. So I said “Hey, that place is still there. I’ll go back and get another hamburger.” So I walked back to that hamburger place—I’m by myself now. I walk in the door and as soon as I walk in the door I can feel everybody looking at me. I said, “Oops, this is one of those places I shouldn’t be.” I said, “What the hell, I was here earlier, I got a hamburger. I’m going to ask them for a hamburger.” They said, “I’m sorry, we don’t serve coloreds,” or something like that. I said,
“Wait a minute, I was here earlier and I just bought a hamburger.” “I don’t care if you were, we don’t serve you.”

Now, first, I was upset and angry because I was rejected because of my race, but then it really hit me. I said, “Wait a minute, I came in here earlier, and my race didn’t change [laughing] since the time I came here earlier, and some of the same people were still working there.” I thought, “Wait a minute, the only reason why they served me before is that there was a large group of young white people there. They didn’t know what these people would do.” If they had told me that then, maybe the other students would have said, “Well, if you don’t serve him, you’re not going to serve us.” Everybody’s walking out and they don’t want to lose that money, and so they said, “Okay,” but since I was by myself they said, “This guy I can do without,” you know. That really hit me and that really taught me a lesson.

That was a microcosm of what happened in the transitional years in St. Louis, a place that didn’t have signs, and some days you might be able to do this and other days you wouldn’t be in the neighborhood. Because of that I got more involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and then testing cases and so forth and so on, in those years, but that’s all part of growing up.

Crawford: How much were you into the movement?

Wilson: Well, in different ways in different times. CORE was active in those days, in the early days, in the fifties. This was when I was in college now, at Washington University. I did participate in some CORE test cases. What we would do is to have a black person go into a hotel or restaurant by himself and he would either be served or not served. Then you’d have a black and a white person go in and they would be served or not served. Then you would have a white person go in, the same white person go in by themselves, and you are both creating valuable data for legal challenges and pointing out the inanity of it all. So we did that. Then I participated in, of course, the NAACP and different kinds of things, but later on I even got more involved when I got the first job and moved to the deep South. That was an interesting kind of thing with all kinds of—

Crawford: I’d like to back up a little bit and talk about the forties and your family, what memories you have of vacations, and what your rituals were and so on.

Wilson: Okay. Well, in terms of family rituals, much of the social life was associated with the church because as I said, my mother and father were very active and continued to be a prominent members of the church. Our normal schedule was, on Sunday mornings we would get up early, we’d go to Sunday school and then we would stay for church. Then we would come home and we would have dinner and then we would go back often. There was a three o’clock program or some children’s program, or something, at three in the afternoon. Some of us would go to that depending on what the program was and whether
we had an obligation to go to it or not. Then, later on in the evening Sunday, there was something called the BTU or the Baptist Training Union, or earlier it was called the BYPU, which was the Baptist Young People’s Union, and finally there was night service.

Now, what I didn’t tell you before I started talking about all these social things and didn’t continue the line, was that because I studied piano at an early—seven, eight—and because I wanted to learn how to accompany my father quickly, I practiced hard, so I learned quickly. My sister—my oldest sister also learned very quickly. She was older than me, and she had been studying longer than me, and so at a young age she became the pianist for the Sunday school, and then, subsequently, became the pianist for the church. Then, because my middle sister, Marian, also played piano, but she was not as focused on it and didn’t care about it as much—she did what she had to do, but she didn’t really get the bug like my oldest sister did and like I did. Then I was the second best pianist in the family. My father would either ask my oldest sister or he would ask me to play for him. I must have been around twelve when I could play well enough to accompany most of the things he—wanted to perform.

Then I became the pianist for the Sunday school, and ultimately the pianist for the church. That meant that every Sunday I had an obligation first to the Sunday school and then the church. Because you were talented, you were supposed to share your talents for the benefit of the church. So that was fine. It was a good deal, you know—you’d get a little pat on the back. People would say, “Oh, you played. That’s nice young man; that’s a good thing to do. We’re proud of you.” So that was good enough and you also were paid a decent salary.

Crawford: Outstanding.

Wilson: But as you start getting older, thirteen—I think I started around maybe eleven or ten, and I started with the Sunday school. Then my sister sometimes, if something happened, she’s not playing for the church and she wants to go somewhere or something, then I—by that time I was playing well enough to play. Though usually in the Sunday school it was hymns. You are reading hymns and they were straightforward, fairly easy to play. Once in a while if you had to accompany an anthem or something, then you would just practice a little bit harder and your teacher would help you, but after a while you were pretty good. Because you played for church you got to be a very good reader, and so I could sight-read very well. We played for church and then I played for the BTU or BYPU.

Then when I played for church there were night services, so I would play Sunday school, church, BTU, and night service, all day long; that’s a lot of playing. Now, I mean, that was gradual. Eventually I stopped playing for the Sunday school and some other younger kid—it’s usually something they
would get a young kid to do. Then after you reach a certain age, let’s say ten, eleven, then if they can find somebody else to play, “Jesus Loves Me,” or whatever, then they’ll get that and then you graduate to first playing, occasionally accompanying something, and then there’s the children’s choir. My sister accompanied that, and then eventually I accompanied that. There were other kids who played and then they would do it, so they used several different kids. So all of that was part of it.

This relates to another ritual, which was a family ritual because as I said, because of those obligations on Sundays that’s, you know, I mean, I was in church most of the time, okay. Now, in addition to that, there was a family ritual. My father, being a cook and a butler for a private family, wasn’t there for dinner most days during the week because he was working, and he wouldn’t get home until about seven-thirty or eight o’clock. That meant that we would eat earlier than that; my mother would cook for us and we’d eat earlier, and then by the time he got home we would be through and he would eat. Often he ate at work anyway. He would come and he’d be tired, he’d go to sleep, or he would go to choir rehearsal or whatever he had to do, so it was a different kind of situation. So we didn’t see much of him because we’d wake up and he was gone, and in the evening he would come home.

He was a very dominant personality too, and we had chores to do. We wanted to make sure we had done our chores before our father came home because he had a very big voice. He never—my father hit me once as a child; I only got a spanking once from him. My mother, we would get spankings from her all the time. But see, our mother, because we were so familiar, because she’d have to tell us three times before we would move—you know how, the typical thing. But my father would just have to look at us and we’d immediately go, and if he’d raise his voice, my God, that was really terror, because he had a big powerful voice. He would call me—my nickname was Pal, and that’s an interesting story about the Pal. “Pal!” or “Sunny”—he’d call me Sunny or Pal, and immediately if that voice was raised then you had to respond immediately.

Now, the reason why I give you that background is because Sundays were glorious days. Not only go to church and wear nice clothes, because he was a good dresser and I wanted to emulate him—I wanted to dress well and that kind of stuff too—but the other thing was that on Sundays we had grand dinners. We had a dining room. Now, this house was a small house: we had a living room, we had a dining room, we had two bedrooms and a kitchen, and there were four kids, okay? Now, the way it worked is that—I mean, we were young kids. My oldest sister, the three girls, they had two beds, and the way I think it was supposed to work is that two would sleep in one bed; the two youngest ones would sleep in one bed, because my youngest sister was four years younger than I am, and then the oldest sister would have the other bed. But over time they pushed those beds together so that there was more space, a
little bit more space. Three of them would sleep in the bed at least for the growing up years.

Now, since I was a boy, I slept on what was called a rollaway bed because we had this formal dining room with the beautiful china set. We would push the table back, roll the table back, and then we’d pull out this rollaway bed. We would open up the rollaway bed, and there was a door between the living room and the dining room that actually worked in those days. You could pull the sliding door out and that would separate the dining room from the living room. If somebody was sitting in the living room, when I was ready to go to sleep, we would pull that door across, move the dining room table back, pull the rollaway bed out, and I’d sleep on the rollaway bed. So I had the rollaway bed, and my mother and father had the other bedroom in the back. That was the way, and I remember that very well.

Sunday was the day that my father was home, so we’d have this major ritual in this dining room. And I thought everybody did this—the table would be set elegantly for Sunday dinner. We had water glasses, we had ice tea glasses, they had wine glasses, and occasionally my father would let us have some wine; the girls didn’t like it but I used to like it, “Ooh, let me have a little taste of it, just a little”—”

[intererview interruption]

Wilson: Everybody did that on Sunday. Now, the crowning part of what happened is that we would all come home from church—my mother before she went to church would start cooking the food, and by the time we came back the house would be smelling great; she would make this marvelous roast and so forth.

Wilmot: A good cook.

Wilson: Well, she wasn’t a really great cook. My father was a superb cook, but her Sunday dinners were really good. I thought she was a good cook at the time; I subsequently learned that she really wasn’t, but she had some really great dishes. She really had some fantastic dishes. She could do fried chicken in a way that I’ve rarely tasted. What she would do is, not only would she fry it, but she would smother it, and the flavor would be so good. It would be in a big roast pot pan and the aroma was so marvelous.

Crawford: Oh, I’m getting so hungry!

Wilmot: I know!

Wilson: Another one of her favorite dishes was, you take round roast, which is a fairly inexpensive piece of meat, but if you cook it forever and you smother it with this really well-flavored seasoning and have everything mixed well—that was
really good. This food was superb; we’d just smell the aroma when we’d walk in the house and shout “Oh, great!”

Now this was after a day of Sunday; we had to get up early in the morning, 6:30 or 7:00 AM, get all ready so we would get downtown to go to our church. And then we would spend two or three hours in church; then we would come home and we were hungry, and mother would get home too. She would usually come to church later and leave maybe a few minutes early to get everything ready, and then we would arrive.

So there we are sitting there. Now, father comes in now, he’s the king, so he sits at the center of the table and holds court. We discuss everything from what happened at church to what was in the newspaper to what’s going on politically. Occasionally, there would be a guest and that was always great. Dinner would go on for an hour and a half, two hours easily, on a Sunday. The only thing that would stop it was if there were a three-o’clock program on which somebody had to perform and/or somebody had to attend. Sometimes the dinner would keep going on because it was so great; the exciting verbal exchange, being able to express yourself and being encouraged to express yourself, and being encouraged to discuss everything, was always intellectually stimulating.

And of course there would be a certain amount of gossip going on about, “Sister Jones had on this hat,” or “Did you see that outfit that Mary—“this outrageous person “—had on?” And in this church, there were a couple of ladies that got all the young guys’ attention because they would wear outrageous low-cut super-tight outfit. I mean these ladies were out there.

Crawford: She was colorful.

Wilson: Oh! When she walked in and the whole church would stop and look. It’s like she was like a character out of a novel. Then there were all kinds of people in the church and all kinds of things that were going on. But the church being the center of the social as well as the religious community meant that that was very, very important. That was probably the biggest kind of thing because church activities—there’s this special day that you have special speakers, there’s solos, who sang the solo today, how they did today, who’s accompanying whom, you know what I mean? And in a musical family, what’s going on, what other churches are doing, what church choirs are doing.

Crawford: Really a focal point. How about aunts and uncles and cousins?

Wilson: That’s the other thing, on Sundays, that was the day when people would visit. We would have cousins and aunts and uncles, and we had people who were coming—the whole tradition of having people who came from the South, who were relatives who were trying to move north, and who would come to visit. There were certain family members, who always took family people in, and
our family was like that. My mother, who had a really large extended family, was always some cousin or niece or something who was coming to St. Louis and trying to go to school, so they would stay with us.

Now, we had these two bedrooms, and you know what happened? When that would happen, either the person, if they were my age or if they were close to my age and were male, they might share my bed, or if they were older or something, then we had a couch that we lent out. And then when we had guests, some people would sleep on the rollaway; we would put down pallets so you would sleep on the floor. There was never any question about somebody being accommodated, you know, with these two bedrooms and everybody would make a way and it was fine, so we really got to know people pretty well. That was really important, people coming, and sometimes people would stay with us for six months, until they were able to get a job and go somewhere and so forth.

Crawford: So it was kind of a constant.

Wilson: Exactly, a constant kind of thing, because we owned the house, you know, and we could take in a few people, so that was our part of it.

Wilmot: That’s so interesting when you contrast that with your description of St. Louis as this transformation point, as this pivotal point where people’s lives just changed, and your family participated in that in a very personal way.

Wilson: Exactly, very much, very much a part of it.

Wilmot: I have one question that—were you going to say something?

Wilson: No, no, go ahead. But at one point, I want to talk about my mother, because—see, you get me talking and then— [laughter] Okay.

Wilmot: I have one question, which is, did you ever go visit your father at his place of work before he started working for the post office and still worked for that family?

Wilson: That’s a very interesting, very poignant kind of thing too. I didn’t visit him then; I never visited him at his place. We would call him all the time because he usually would answer the phone. He worked for a family who were known as the Benoirs. They lived in a very exclusive area in St. Louis and they had a big beautiful house.

Wilmot: What was it called?

Wilson: It was called—now it’s in this section that people would call Central West End because there are these massive mansions over there. Then there was a time when the mansions—most of those people who owned those mansions
moved out to the suburbs and built new houses, but some of the people held onto them. Then, after the sixties, people began to discover these great mansions for these good prices, so people would buy them again. It’s gentrified again so it’s still—and often these were gated communities and things like that. Not all of them were, but most of the streets were very exclusive kinds of streets. Ironically, it wasn’t that far away from where we grew up when we lived, not in the first Midtown but when we moved in the 4800 of Page, when we moved in 1943. It was just over a little—about ten blocks going south was this area.

Wilmot: So that’s where you would call your father.

Wilson: We would call our father. Usually, when we would call our father it had to do with some dispute between the kids. The older sister would tell us what to do. She was sort of a surrogate family because my mother also worked, and she also worked as a domestic. So if something we couldn’t agree—as we got older and began to revolt against my older sister we would call Father or Mother, “Gloria wouldn’t let us do this,” and “Gloria said this,” or blah, blah, blah. Or Gloria would call them, “Pal’s not doing this,” and “Pal’s not doing that,” so she would call my father. Well, you know, we knew everybody was terrified of my father so you didn’t want that to happen, and you knew you weren’t supposed to bother him anyway. So it would usually, when we were really getting into a spat, this would really cut it off real quick. That was the closest thing we got to going there. So, I didn’t go there until much later; I knew where it was but I didn’t go there.

There are some very poignant stories. I have some good friends of mine who did go to where their parents worked in a domestic capacity. I remember one case of Elouise’s cousin. Her cousins are like sisters because she grew up with them for part of the time. This one cousin, who now is the chancellor of the community college district in Tampa, her father—it wasn’t her father, it was her grandfather—wanted her to come in the back door because that’s where he worked; he came in the back door. She went there because—and she was in college—she went there because the people for whom he worked had talked to her or something about it. They knew she was a college student and she was trying to do things, and they were decent people and they had said, “Look, we have some books that we think will help you in this and you should come out and get them,” so she was going to go out and get them.

Well, for her, going to somebody’s house, you go in, you go and you knock on the front door and you say, “Here I am. I came to get what you told me to do.” But he said, “No, you can’t go in the front door because I always go in the back door.” She said, “I’m not working for them. They asked me to come for this so I’m going to the front door.” And he was furious that she wanted to go in the front door because for him, he took it, “Look, I work for these people. It’s disrespectful for you to come to the front door; you are a
domestic, you have to understand.” He’s also fifty years older than her at that point; his view of the world was that. I remember that story. It was very tough.

I never went there at that time. Later on I went there, but then the whole family situation had changed. They were very wealthy but then the father, the patriarch of the family, was in the navy during the war and I think he was a commander or something in the navy, and I think he got killed during the war. So that meant that though they had, you know, he was from a wealthy family, there was no money coming in on a regular basis. But the wife’s mother was also wealthy, was an owner of a bank in Arkansas somewhere. So, because of that the fortunes of the family really dropped down. They still were wealthy but not in the very top elite of the wealthy in St. Louis. So they moved, and they moved out of that big, big house and moved to a different house, a suburban house, but my father continued to work for them.

Now, the tragedy of my father, from my perspective, was that he worked— during World War II as I said, his position increased, his financial position increased. That’s when we were able to buy the house and that’s when we were able to move. But when the war was over, because he was older and because he hadn’t been working at the post office as long as some of the veterans had—and also after the war, you remember, all veterans got a certain—you work in any government job, you get so many points or something like that. So when that happened he was forced out of his job.

Now, at that time there was also a big social change. It was happening in the unions. What was happening, blacks would work in factories at that time primarily as menials, you know, custodians and so forth, were, because of the union movement, were being able to move on the line themselves. This was a real pivotal point for a lot of blacks who had worked in factories to get the full benefits of working then and decent pensions and so forth. So, at that point he had the opportunity to go into that, and if he had done it his fortunes would have turned, but he wasn’t able. He had tried when he first went to St. Louis like sell insurance, sell real estate, and that kind of thing, but it really didn’t work out so well, so then he went into domestic service.

He did well until the fortunes fell in this wealthy family, which meant that he wasn’t getting commensurate raises, but by then there was such an attachment, a bond between him and the family and the family and him. He knew the daughters, they knew him, they depended on him, he depended on them; it was that kind of symbiotic relationship, so he stayed with them. In retrospect he should have moved to the factory thing because that was where there were the opportunities to progress. Which means that when he retired he didn’t have much of a pension or anything else, because he was working for people who really didn’t have that much money themselves, and their own financial fortunes decreased over time. So it was kind of tragic from that point of view. But in terms of the personal relationships with the people, we knew who they were, we knew their voices but, as I became older and as I became
more sophisticated, I had mixed feelings about them. I didn’t dislike them. They were decent people to us. When there were deep financial problems he would go to them and they would help him. But I felt, “Wait a minute, he’s been working that long, he probably should be making more money, blah, blah, blah.” It was representative of an older life, an older time, a more servile, master-servant kind of situations that I saw, and I never wanted to do that; that was the other thing. On the other hand, I did many menial jobs myself. I did everything because that whole work ethic was so firmly inculcated. I worked in everything from cutting grass, washing dishes, being a porter. And because I did it when I was a teenager, I knew “I’ll never do this forever because this is hard,” doing that stuff.

Crawford: How about home chores? You mentioned home chores.

Wilson: Oh yeah, home chores were different. And this is being the only male of three sisters so that was a very interesting dynamic, and an older sister. If I had been the eldest or the youngest, it would have been a lot easier, but because I was in between it was difficult, because the girls had set up the regime of what it is was supposed to be. And then my father set up a regime of what he thought it was supposed to be, and sometimes they clashed, and he wasn’t there, so it was very interesting, especially traveling around the country as a railway mail clerk. What happened was that, you know, there were always chores—dishwashing and stuff like that. My father always told me, “Well look, when I’m not here—,” he had very much the patriarchal view of the world and he said, “The man is the head of the house and you’re the head of the house when I’m not here.” Well, he didn’t say I was the head of the house because he would never have said that, but he did say, “You’re the man of the house when I’m not here.” In other words, “You have to make sure that you protect your sisters, you don’t let anybody bother your sisters, you have to protect your sisters.” [pounds table for emphasis] And not only that, “You have to do the heavy work around the house.”

Now this is, I’m a little kid, remember, this is back in the 1940s and they had coal in St. Louis, and so a major job was getting coal from outside when you wanted coal. We had coal ovens, coal furnaces, and in order to get heat people would deliver big tons of coal outside your house. They would drop this outside your house and then you’d have to hire somebody to take the coal in, because we had a gang, we had to lift it up and put it down the coal shoot. That was a pretty dirty job. You would hire people to do that; they’d come in and do that. But then in the morning, what you’d have to do is to make sure that the fire was stoked, because you would have a nice fire at night. Then in the morning, it would all burn and you would have to put more coal in the stove and stuff, and that’s a man’s job. So I had to learn to do that pretty early, to go down, get the big clumps of coal, some of them which I could barely lift, and throw them in the oven without throwing yourself in, [laughing] and stoke it so that it would burn. Then you also had to—when the coal burned and you had ashes—you’d have to take the ashes out of the oven, put them in the ash
cans and then take them out to the ash pit. Now, that was a man’s job, you had to do that, so I had to do that.

Then there were things like the lawn; you had to mow the lawns. That was an outside job; that’s a man’s job. You had to shovel the snow and the ice, and we had hot and cold in St. Louis. So we had to do those men’s jobs. My father’s view, “You do the men’s jobs; you do the outside work and they do the inside work.” My sister would say, “Uh-uh, no, everybody has to—you eat, you have to help with the dishes.” So the way they figured, everybody had to—and since there were three of us, one had to take the dishes off the table and scrape the dishes out, another one had to wash the dishes, the other one had to dry the dishes, and then we’d rotate. So I felt, “Well, I have to do the outside work, why do I have to this?” But they were bigger than me, and they said, “No, you will do this,” so I ended up having to do that. I had to do the girl’s work, at least what I thought was girl’s work.

Crawford: In addition to the men’s work.

Wilson: In addition to the men’s work.

Wilmot: I like Gloria. [laughter]

Wilson: Well, Gloria was backed up by my mother; my mother made her do it, so Gloria said, “You’re going to do this,” and I had to do that. But on the other hand, I must admit, because we talk about this all the time, they say, “Yeah, but you never had to cook.” Well, that’s true, I didn’t have to cook; I never learned how to cook at home. I mean, you know, I could cook a hot dog or fry a piece of baloney or something, but I didn’t learn to cook, and I never really had to. I would have to help them sometimes carry out the washing; we eventually got one of those wind-up wash things, those things that I used to help carry the heavy—because some of those sheets would be heavy, I had to do that.

Crawford: Wringers.

Wilson: Yeah, wringers, the wringers. But there were other things that they did that I didn’t have to do. For example, I never had to iron, so I never learned how to iron until much later, until I got married, and then I learned how to iron. [laughing] It was a mixed bag; there were these different kinds of things that you had to do.

Wilmot: I would like to take a break, is that possible?

Wilson: Sure.

Crawford: Sure.
Wilson: Well, we’re just starting, that’s why there are long periods like this, but it is good to get that flowing. I think I’ve become much more conscious of how larger forces that are outside of an individual’s control, interact with their own personal trajectory.

Wilmot: And also, I mean, I don’t know if you’re thinking about this at all, but this could be useful if you’re writing something about yourself.

Wilson: Sure. Oh yeah, you know, I’ve often threatened one of the things I was going to do is write a book. I thought I might make it fictionalized, about my gang, about the guys I grew up with and what happened to them. But that’s an interesting story and a continuing story; there are some tragic things and some very exhilarating things that happened. It’s really good to reflect about your lifetime especially when you look at your children and your grandchildren.

Crawford: You’re very young for our process. The timing is good for this.

Wilmot: Most people we speak to are older.


Crawford: Twenty or thirty years older, but you obviously worked all this out.

Wilson: Yeah, a lot of it, uh-huh. Do you want to take a break or something? Do you want some more water?

Wilmot: We’re okay.

Crawford: We’re okay, we actually went and got some water.


Crawford: Next time.

Wilmot: But in any event, just for our last twenty or twenty-five minutes, I’m trying to think where we should direct this and I’m thinking about your mother. I’m wondering if you could talk a little about the person that she was?

Wilson: Yes, let’s talk about her, the personality and how I think it impacted on me.

Wilmot: And also her occupation.

Wilson: Right. Yes. Okay, my mother is—I genuinely think—is an angel. I think everybody thinks their mother is an angel, but my mother, I think by any
standard, would be considered an angel. Not just because she was my mother and she was loving and supportive, and all those things that mothers are, but because she had this extraordinary capacity to see good in everything. I mean, it was almost to a fault. She’s the kind of person, “Turn the other cheek;” that’s the kind of person she was. She was just marvelous and seemed to be comfortable with that way of looking at the world, and having the ability to see through any point of crisis and see something good in it. She was a religious person, but not a proselytizing religious person. She was deeply religious personally, but she respected other people’s attitude about religious and things spiritual. She was just an extraordinary woman. She was born in Arkansas as well; she was born in the city called Forrest City, Arkansas. My father was born—I didn’t mention that he was born—in Turner, Arkansas, and I think I should mention how and why they met and so forth.

Wilmot: And her name.

Wilson: Her name is Alma Grace Peoples. As a matter of fact, she has five names. She was named after all of her aunts, and I can’t remember all of them, but let me try: Alma Grace Beulah Cornelius, something else, Peoples, P-E-O-P-L-E-S is her name. She was from a large family from a farm in Forrest City, Arkansas. Her family—there were at least ten siblings; she was the next to the last of those ten siblings. That’s why we had cousins visiting us all the time, because she was the next to last. There was a great tradition in that family of depending on education, as did most people of her generation. She apparently excelled academically and she went to Philander Smith College; this is a college in Little Rock, Arkansas, a traditional black college. And that’s in Little Rock, which is, oh, I guess probably fifty miles away from Forrest City.

It was in Little Rock, Arkansas, where she met my father on a bus. He met her on a bus and he saw her and she saw him, and they got to know each other. It turned out that my father had known one of her sisters. He was about—we never knew how old my mother was; she never told us what her age was. She always said, “Age is a woman’s prerogative and I’m not going to tell you what my age is. That’s my secret and I’m not going to tell you.”

Crawford: You don’t have her birth certificate?

Wilson: No, we don’t have her birth certificate. We figured out roughly. When she died we think she was eighty-four, which would have meant that she was probably born around 1910 or 1911, something like that.

Crawford: She was younger than your father.

Wilson: Yes, she’s about five years younger than him. Anyway, she met him in college, they got married, and they moved to St. Louis. The reason why they moved to St. Louis is—it’s that same pattern that immigrants and migrants do—his oldest sister had moved to a suburb of St. Louis called Kinlock.
Kinlock is one of those traditional all-black towns, and that’s where his sister that was several years older than him had moved. He knew he had a sister there, he knew they could stay with them until he was able to get a job, and since he had had some college education and she had, they thought—. So they moved and stayed with her for a while, she and her husband, but then they moved to St. Louis because they didn’t like Kinlock.

Wilmot: What didn’t they like about Kinlock?

Wilson: Kinlock was kind of a country town. It’s kind of a little funny town and the services weren’t as nice as they were in St. Louis. I mean, the amenities were not as nice. It was fine but, like the history of all black towns, they promised more than most of them were able to deliver. So as a result he moved to—you know, he was progressive and idealistic at the time, and so he moved to St. Louis. They ultimately moved to St. Louis and he began to sell insurance first, and then he tried to sell real estate, then eventually started working for the Benoirs, so that was his trajectory.

At the time, shortly after they were married, my oldest sister was born. Although I think she had a couple of miscarriages, I subsequently discovered, and then my oldest sister was born. Three years later the second one was born, and then the rest of us come along. So over a period of nine or ten years—I guess all of us were born within a ten-year span of time. So that must have been from—I was born in ’37, and there was one after me four years later, so that must have been a period of let’s see—’37-’43—I’m sorry ’41, and it must have been ’31 when my older sister was born. At any rate, it’s in those periods, you know, it’s the end of the Depression and beginning of the war which sort of—the boomtown—and then as I said during the war his situation moved up.

My mother was always interested in poetry, interested in reading and things like that. I remember she used to buy things like Reader’s Digest because she liked to read so much; you pick up this little Digest and get these condenses, but she had other things. The whole idea of learning was important to her; they both were from that generation. She emphasized that business about focusing about learning and “You must do well.” She always was incredibly supportive to anything; any time that you did something successful, she was there. She was a person that, because of my father’s work situation, she didn’t work all the time, because she had those children. She only worked part-time, but she started working part-time as a domestic, and she didn’t always do that; I think maybe I must have been eight or nine when she started doing that; at first she was always there. She was very actively involved in school. She was the mother, when they said parents’ time for school, she was always the person who went. She always showed up for everybody’s everything. She was active in the PTA; she became an officer in the PTA. She was active in the band supporter’s parents; she became an officer in that. And she was one of the mothers that took the trip with the band; she was that way.
Now, the only thing that was unusual about, in terms of the rest of the family history—although she was the one who worked, she was up early in the morning at home. Before any of us were up, she was up, because I think she got up when my father got up, and he was going to work early. So she’s up, she helps all the kids get ready to go to school. She does the washing, the drying, the cleaning the thing, you know, and all of that stuff: grocery shopping, everything. When we come home she’s there, with the little kids, the typical things that a hard-working mother with four kids is doing—she was that. And she did it, never complaining but just always making sure, always taking care of the little extra things, you know, “You were supposed to be here, you were there.” She always made sure that anything that we wanted to do, that we were doing it. She was always the person, as I said, that was actively involved in the school and in any other organization that we were part of.

She also was very interested in clubs. There was something called in those days—there were two clubs that both my parents were involved in. There’s something called the Arkansas Club, and there’s the Arkansas Baptist College Club. My father, having gone to Arkansas Baptist College for a couple of years, was very active in that. That’s related musically because these touring choir groups would come to St. Louis from time to time, sometimes from Arkansas Baptist College but sometimes from other schools. Invariably he got involved in that. He was one of the persons who would help organize it and one of the persons who—sometimes the students would stay at homes with people; sometimes they stayed with us. I guess they must have slept on the couch, or maybe that was one of those times that I ended up sleeping on the couch and they slept on the rollaway bed. [laughs] But, you know, it was that kind of thing. It was always—he was very active in the Arkansas Baptist College Club, she was very active in the Arkansas Club.

Then later on, there was something called the Black Postal Alliance when he worked at the post office. Now, he only worked at the post office for maybe three or four years and that was, as I said, economically the golden years for us. We were able to buy a nice house and everything. But when he stopped working at the post office, she continued to work with the Women’s Auxiliary Post Office, and she was an officer in that. She was often a secretary in those kinds of things. She was a very literate person. She used to quote poetry, and I remember some of the kinds of things. My sisters remember that better than I do, but I remember she loved poetry; she would talk about it.

Wilmot: What would she quote?

Wilson: Well, after I said that I said, “Now, what can I remember?” I can’t—my sisters always remember that. There were a couple of speeches, though. I remember this line and it goes like this—I think she was a valedictorian of her high school class—it goes something like this: “You may think in your colossal egotism that you have the world all mapped out in a systematic
manner, blah, blah, blah.” I can’t remember the rest of it. But the point of it, “But then a breath of wind will come and blow it like mere pawns upon a chessboard, proving that there is a god that shapes your divinity.” It’s something like that.

Crawford: Oh, that’s beautiful.

Wilson: Yes. I once memorized it because I thought it was so great I’d like to remember it. She had this sort of—I think in those days they got what was then referred to as a classical education, that you had to memorize certain things and you do that, and she remembered that. But then you got a sense of the understanding and appreciation of poetry. So she did that, but she was also doing a lot of hard work, and then she became actively involved in committees and groups and things like that. In many ways she was kind of a quiet mover and shaker; my father was a very verbal one. She was verbal too, but she wasn’t the first person that stood up. If somebody says you’re going to talk, well then, he would be there pontificating, and she would be quiet but very thoughtful. If you really wanted to get a good sense of it, you could depend on her, and they balanced each other in an interesting way.

Crawford: Did they have time to do things by themselves?

Wilson: Rarely. I wonder about that, because rarely did they do things together except for church. We would all go to church, but we didn’t go together. Remember, he’s the big voice in the choir and he had to get there early. We had to get there early to go to Sunday school. She had to make sure that everybody was getting there, you know, she had to do the kids’ hair—three sisters. You’ve got to press their hair, you’ve got to braid it, you’ve got to do whatever you are doing; that’s what she did. So everybody is out and then she comes in. She was an usher, though, and the way it worked in that church, there were four different usher boards and in each month they would usher—I think her board ushered on the fourth Sunday of every month. Other than that she would go to church, but she wasn’t up on the stage, or making a speech or something, although when she did, it was time for her group to do it, she was always very good and was always very proud of it.

Part of the thing about, I think, my sense of self, has to do with the fact that my parents were standard. They were always articulate, they always were intelligent, they always were people I was proud of. There were a lot of times when some people were struggling, hard-working people who didn’t look so good and couldn’t speak the English language very well and so forth, but that was never a problem for either of them. I think they were just fortunate in that way.

But the other thing about her is that she was the supreme nurturer. She was always good for any problems or anything that you wanted—and anything she had to say to you, it would always be in a really nice manner. One of the
things I remember was when I got married. She didn’t want me to get married when I got married because she thought it was early, because I was twenty-one when I got married and so she thought it was early. In those days I didn’t—Elouise was nineteen when we got married, but we didn’t think that was young because I graduated from college one week and got married the next week. I thought since I graduated from college, what difference does it make? She was saying, “But you know—” and she liked Elouise and she was so polite. She was so sensitive to what other people would think about what she said. She said, “Well, you know, why don’t you wait until you finish your graduate degree,” because by then I had graduated from Washington University and I had a fellowship to go to the University of Illinois. She said, “Why don’t you wait until you get your master’s degree, a year and a half or two years; you can do that.”

But by then we had been going together for four years and Elouise was saying, “It’s now or never!”

Crawford: Whoah!

Wilson: So I was going, “It’s now, it’s now, it’s now.” [laughs] “I’m nineteen years old and I’m not going to wait around forever!” But see, we started going together—let’s see, she was sixteen. We went together for four years, but how did that work? I don’t think she was fifteen. Somehow, the years—I was a freshman in college when I met her; I met her on Christmas in the middle of my freshman year, so technically she was still nineteen {fifteen}, but she was going to be twenty {sixteen} in August; her birthday is in August. We got married in June, so she was nineteen. So she would have been twenty and I met her when, I guess, she had already turned sixteen, but she was just barely sixteen. So anyway, it was closer to sixteen and twenty; that’s why I count the four years.

Wilmot: How old do you think your mother was when she got married? That’s my question, I’m wondering about her that she would give you that advice.

Wilson: Oh, I would think that she probably was—I’m guessing probably early twenties. He probably was late twenties.

Crawford: When was Gloria born?

Wilson: Gloria was born, I don’t know, ’33. Well, let’s see, I know when I was born; I was born in ’37, so she was born in ’32. That’s sounds right, because he was born 1905 and so ’31—

Crawford: She was born in 1910.

Wilson: Right, she was about 1910, so 1910 and 1930 or ’31, that would have made her twenty-one. That’s seems about right. He would have been twenty-four,
twenty-five, something like that. He was born 1905, so in 1930 he's twenty-five.

Crawford: But your mother knew you were going on for greater things, for a Ph.D. and so on.

Wilson: She didn’t know that because, I mean, I didn’t know that. At the time, you know, you go to college, you get a job; college is a means to an end. But what happened when I went to college I discovered, “Hey, I really enjoy doing this, I really enjoy learning and I really love composition.” It wasn’t very pragmatic at the time but, “I really am fulfilled by this,” and I had the luxury to think about that. We didn’t have any children, you know, besides we weren’t even married. We were just getting married the next week and Elouise had finished her—she’s a medical technologist—she had finished her medical technology work so she said, “Hey—” and so that was it. Because many times—when I graduated from high school—I didn’t know Elouise then—but when I graduated from high school, there were many people that got married a couple years after that. A lot of time girls, by the time they are nineteen or you know, unless you were in college, and then in college that was when you really got married, you know. So, it was a different time; it was totally different.

Wilmot: I’m intrigued by your mother’s comment though, for that reason, because even for her generation then that was late.

Wilson: Oh yeah, yeah, right. She was saying, “Why don’t you get your degree?” and I was saying, “Well, we don’t need to get our degrees.” I was so optimistic, I mean, I’m a perennial optimist; “If I’m going to get my degree, I’ll get my degree.” She was saying, “Well, what if Elouise becomes pregnant?” I said, “That’s not a problem, this is modern; we have ‘Emco’, we have this other stuff—” In those times, what was this little spray or something you used? Foam. It was some kind of foam that you used and that was supposed to do it, which is like about 60-75 percent proven. In those days to me that just seemed—I thought this was perfect; I didn’t realize what the odds were.

Crawford: Yes, we never did worry that much.

Wilson: Then we later on had some kids that we called the “Emco kids.” [laughter] But at any rate, it was at that point I thought, “Oh Mother, you are so old fashioned.” But even that, I recite that story because she was so diplomatic about it, she was so diplomatic. I tend to be diplomatic, very diplomatic, and I think a lot of that comes from her, being very concerned about how other people feel and trying to make sure that you’re scrupulously fair and honest and have integrity. Somewhere that was internalized very, very deeply in me and I think I attribute it to her. Not that my father wasn’t a person who was honest and have integrity, but she was much more conscious of making people
feel comfortable about themselves, and yet real strong about family values and so forth.

A matter of fact, she ultimately became—she had a distant cousin of hers, not that distant, she knew them; they lived around the corner from us but I didn’t know they were—they were cousins of cousins. The only cousins that I really knew well were people who were the children of my uncles and aunts. All these other people, I didn’t even know who they were; they would go back a couple of generations. But she and one of those distant cousins sort of founded creating a family reunion of the Peoples-Ellis—Peoples was her maiden name—of the Peoples-Ellis family, and now it happens every year and it’s a really big success; she’s the founder of that.

Wilmot: A reunion.

Wilson: It started in the ‘70s—’74 and it’s happened every year. A matter of fact, this year it was in Atlanta.

Crawford: And you go to that?

Wilson: We went to that. Yes, we go to that and it’s great. Now, there are extended people and we know them. Some of them, the close—my mother’s sisters were who I knew, those people who used to come to our house, and then she had two sisters that lived in Chicago. Every summer I’d go to Chicago and stay with them, and so forth. So we still know them, and then there are a lot of other people we’ve met. At these family reunions there are 200 or 300 people, so it’s a big deal.

Wilmot: How long do they last?

Wilson: It’s usually a weekend; it’s always Labor Day weekend. It’s really interesting. What has happened as the generations have gone on, our kids—you know, because usually family things, you don’t usually get interested in that until you are older, except for people you know closely. So when my mother and her cousins first started this, I think we went to the first one and then we didn’t go to many other years. If I had to be near St. Louis I didn’t go, and because it was at Labor Day, which usually was the beginning of school, I’m usually getting geared up for that, so I often didn’t participate in it. But as she got older and she kept saying, “Why don’t you come, why don’t you come,” I began to go more. So I decided—back in ’96 we hosted it—I hosted it, out here. Now everybody didn’t come, but we had over 100 people who came from the Midwest out here.

Crawford: Where did you do it?

Wilson: We did it over in Emeryville, you know, that Holiday Inn in Emeryville? That was good because we wanted a place that was modestly—that the
accommodations didn’t cost a lot, because you’ve got a wide range of economic backgrounds in the family, so that you had that there. On the other hand it was also important, as my daughter and son became adults and began doing things—my son is in marketing and works for—was working for General Foods, and he was interviewing people, and it turns out he was interviewing one of his cousins. He didn’t know but he heard the name, because her name was Peoples. He remembered that was my mother’s maiden name and she said she was from St. Louis, and he remembered. So then he called me and he said, “Look, there’s this woman applying for this position and are there Peoples—?” I didn’t know her name but I knew—and she was Peoples from St. Louis. I said, “Probability is—something.” I think the next time he talked to her he asked her about her father’s name, and I knew her father, her father’s name. So then I said, “We really ought to let you know of the generations—” because at the time he was single. I said, “You might be interested in someone who is your cousin or something. [laughing] You should know something about that.”

Wilmot: A wide-ranging family.

Wilson: That’s right.

Crawford: Olly, did she read stories to you, your mother or your father? And tell stories about family?

Wilson: Oh, yes. Talking about family was very important and understanding folklore. Again, the older I get, the more I have—and because I have consciously and formally and made a special effort to study African American music, history, and culture. Because of that, I reflect back on things that I knew and stories that people would tell when I was a little kid, when relatives would come. They would talk about things that happened when they were kids and some of the folklore about some of the family stuff. Folklore about stories and things about ghosts and the words that they used for ghost. Things like “haints” and stuff like that, and terms I’d never heard before and didn’t know, and this whole sort of spiritual mysticism that sometimes they would touch on. Then it all began to come together. They would often get together and they would talk about different things that happened, and then I had an uncle who liked to talk. As a matter of fact, a lot of people in the family liked to talk. But this one uncle talked about his experiences in World War I; he was one of my mother’s oldest brothers and he was in World War I. He talked about the mustard gas and how it was being a black person in France fighting in World War I. It was interesting; these are things that sort of really impacted on me, just hearing that kind of thing.

The reason why I told you about this family reunion is that she also had the ability to pull things together and in a quiet way was a very good organizer. She pulled that together and was active in groups and public things. Again, that race idea. They both were active in NAACP and they both—a matter of
fact, she was a Republican, they both were Republicans. I would say, “Now wait a minute.” You know, later I said, “Why are my parents Republicans?” Well, this hit me when I was in high school, “Why are they Republicans?” Well, they were Republicans because most black folks, up until the New Deal, were Republicans, and that’s because of Lincoln. You know, Lincoln freed the slaves so you are Republicans forever. So that was it. They were part of that generation. What happened is that with F.D.R., many of the people switched. Most blacks, I think, began to switch and become Democrats because of F.D.R. and because Democrats seemed to be a little bit more supportive in terms of civil rights and so forth, and of course by the sixties there was no question about it. But in the fifties though, both of them were lukewarm about it.

Individuals were, I mean, Mrs. Roosevelt had a very positive attitude about that, but in general, Republicans or Democrats, they would only go so far. But Democrats as a group tended to, at that time, to be more supportive of that kind of thing, and that’s when most people switched. They didn’t switch, though they didn’t always vote Republican. I think they didn’t switch because they were raised Republican and they thought of themselves as Republican, their view of Republicans. And remember, it was in the sixties when you had the Dixiecrats, and the real Southerners were also the Democrats. From a view of the Southern blacks, the Democrats were the Southern majority, Faubus, and the governors of the Deep South states. When they thought Democrat, they didn’t think of that. The Republicans were virtually nonexistent then in the South so they said, “We’re the Republicans,” so often the blacks were the Republicans in those states. They didn’t have any power, but they thought of themselves as carrying the legacy of Lincoln, so that was part of the issue. But it was always—later on in the sixties, well, even before the sixties, in the fifties, I said, “How could you be Republican?” And then I began to understand where they were coming from.

Wilmot: Did you actually ask them that question?

Wilson: Oh yeah.

Wilmot: And what did they say?

Wilson: My mother would say, “Well, you can’t trust either one of them so it doesn’t make any difference.” And I was saying, “Well, yeah, but still you’re voting—” but she said, “I don’t always vote Republican; I didn’t vote for this one, I didn’t vote for that one. I’m a Republican still because—” and her perspective was the way it was when she was a young woman. If she were alive today I don’t think she would vote Republican. Although before she died she still—well, I think the other thing that complicated that was she used to be a judge in the political system, you know, to go into the poll place. So I think she sort of felt a loyalty to, at least publicly, not say anything bad about Republicans, because being judge, I think, she got a little money for that. And
I think genuinely, at least years ago, she thought of herself from the Southern perspective of being a Republican, but then she didn’t talk much about it. When it became clear if the Republicans were by and large certainly anti-civil rights and so forth, that was when I was giving her a hard time.

Crawford: That would be a big shift for somebody to make if you’ve grown up that.

Wilson: Oh yeah. Yeah, it was tough. She could understand it ideologically but in terms of saying to herself that, “I’m going to vote Democrat,” or saying it publicly, even though she probably did vote Democrat, because I remember the Nixon-Kennedy thing. That was pivotal for a lot of blacks, the Nixon-Kennedy thing. A lot of the blacks at that time who had voted Republican then began—they saw Kennedy as a hope.

Crawford: A lot of everybody.

Wilson: A lot of everybody saw Kennedy as a hope. I think she told me—“I didn’t vote—” because I said, “You vote Republican, you’re—” and she said, “I didn’t vote for Nixon,” so I said, “Okay.” She said, “I vote for who I think is the best person,” so it was that. But it still bothered me that—I said, “Why are you still a Republican judge?” But that’s what she did.

Wilmot: That’s so interesting and it brings me to this wonderful—I’m sure we’ll talk about this next time—but just talking about how your awareness changed and how that interacted with their awareness. We’ll talk about that next time; it’s a huge topic. We are actually at the end of this tape, with about a minute left, and I think we are maybe at a stopping point.

Crawford: It’s a good breaking time.

Wilmot: I had one question though: does your family still keep the home in St. Louis?

Wilson: We just sold that home last year and it’s a sad story, I mean, really a sad story. I wanted them to sell the house at 4851 Page—I lived there. My sister, my oldest sister, the one who is dead, was the one who had the most children; she had six children. She and her husband were having marital difficulties for most of their marriage until they finally got a divorce, and she was leaving her husband and so she would bring them to our house, you know. My mother and father were like rocks of Gibraltar in terms of stability, and this and “You will do this,” the moral virtues, and how you should live your life. They really had very clear ideas about that. As I said, we just took that for granted and we thought everybody did that and that was the way it is, so in terms of those
values, it was very clear. And her children got all those values so they’re
doing fine. But what happened is that the house, which my father bought
in ’43, he said, “This house is the most expensive investment I’m ever going
to have and I’ll use it for everything. You’re never supposed to—” [tape ends]

[End of Interview 1]
Interview 2: October 3, 2002

Wilmot: Today’s date is October 3rd. Professor Olly Wilson, Caroline Crawford, and Nadine Wilmot. To begin, today we were thinking about really trying to move through your graduate school years. I wanted to start off with some follow up questions from our last conversation, and then kind of speak directly to your college experience and then move right through there. I think I had one question. You had mentioned that your father’s love of music was really what brought you to—his commitment because it was more than a love, it was a commitment. I was wondering where he got that from?

Wilson: Okay. He studied music in college, and since there is no history, as far as I know, of his parents being involved professionally in music, I suspect it was his personal predilections. Also, because he was from a large family and since they were people who went to church regularly, they were exposed to traditional religious African American music, and within the African American community, there was a rich musical heritage: folk music, formal music, and religious music. I imagine that he started that way, and then, when he went to college, I think he began to focus on music and discovered that he had a beautiful voice. Then he sang in the choir. So, I think that was probably the genesis of his early involvement in music.

Wilmot: We talked some about your mother’s family, some about your father and your father’s family, but I just wanted to know—where did your family come from on both sides? Where did they come from as far back as you know?

Wilson: Okay. Let’s talk about my mother’s side since we have talked so much about my father. My mother was from Forest City, Arkansas. She was born in Forest City, Arkansas. She was, I think, number eight of a group, I think, of nine siblings. Her grandfather was the patriarch of the family. According to her [family] tree, his name was Ben Peoples, and he married twice. His first wife’s name was Adeline, and from that union there were several, I think nine kids, including my mother’s father. Then, my mother’s father was married to my mother’s mother, and her name was Fanny, I think her last name was—I better check that because I am not sure of her mother’s name, and I don’t want to give you—but her first name was Fanny. Then, my [mother’s] father, that is the grandfather, the patriarch, then married a second time; and he married somebody whose name was Caroline. Then, from that union, there were about four children. So, there were nine children from the first, and four from the second marriage. So, she had stepsisters and brothers.

Now, my mother’s father—and this is part of family lore that we are trying to verify—as far as we know, we are able to trace back on that side of the family to Arkansas. But we know that they must have come from somewhere before. The details of that are not known at this point. As a matter of fact, one of the things I hope to do in my retirement is to explore that more deeply. As of now, that’s as far back as we can go. My mother’s father must have been born about the middle of the nineteenth century or something like that because my mother was next to
the last sibling of nine children. My mother was born, we estimate, about 1911. We have to estimate because she never wanted to tell us her age. My father was born in 1905.

In terms of my father’s family, it is clearer. His father, whose name was Will Wilson, and one of his father’s brothers according to family legend, came to Arkansas from Mississippi. My father, who was the last of nine children, was born in 1905, so his father must have been born about 1865 or something like that. My great grandfather, my father’s father’s father, according to legend, was a slave in a plantation somewhere in Mississippi. But there is a family legend that he worked for a family—this is during slavery—whose name was Farr. Where the name Wilson came from, I don’t really know, but he worked for a family whose name was Farr. He was a very cruel slave owner at the time. Now whether this is true or not, I don’t know, but according to the legend my great grandfather had done something wrong and the slave owner was going to force him to eat the remains of a dead dog. So, he rebelled, killed the slave owner, and ran away. It is speculated that at that time our family must have taken this name Wilson, and then somehow his son, my grandfather ended up coming from Mississippi to Arkansas. That’s the legend that passed down, you know oral history, but how much of that is conflated, how much of that is a mixture of things, how much of that is true or not true, remains to be seen. Those stories like that did happen, whether it happened to them is—

Wilmot: I think that it is so interesting that you said family legend repeatedly because that is one of those really interesting questions, what people want to remember about themselves, want to tell about themselves. And the story that you have told is one of courage. I wonder, what were the other messages that were told to you about your family? The other stories people liked to tell about your family?

Wilson: Well, that story is the strongest one that I recall in terms of a long view—two, three generations back. At our latest family reunion, which is known as the Peoples-Ellis family reunion—not on my father’s side, but I am skipping back over to my mother’s side. My mother’s maiden name was Alma Peoples. At this reunion, the oldest member who was there, was given an opportunity at the banquet to talk about family history—early family history. Actually, he was in his eighties about then. He is a cousin of mine because my mother was the last of a group of nine siblings, and he was a son of one of the first. So, there was quite a difference between his age and my mother’s age, even though they were first cousins. He talks about history on the Ellis side. The reason why it is a Peoples-Ellis family is because two of my mother’s sisters, who were Peoples from Forest City Arkansas, married two brothers who were Ellis’. So the Peoples and the Ellis’ became combined. In addition, there was another Ellis cousin—an older cousin who married a Peoples brother. So, there were two Peoples females who married two Ellis males, and one Ellis female who married a Peoples male. So, the families combined three ways, so it is known as the Peoples-Ellis, or the Ellis-Peoples family, depending on who is presenting it at that particular time.[chuckles]
At this reunion, he talked about there being part of the family, going back on the Ellis’ side, who came to Arkansas again from Mississippi, and who had been successful in having a farm early on, shortly after the end of slavery. Somehow they got this farm. But, one of the members of the family had some trouble with the law, and in order to save this member of the family, they had to sell the farm. Then, according to the story, someone went back and got the farm again.

That was another story that I just heard for the first time in that kind of detail. Because it is the Ellis side, opposed to the Peoples side, I really hadn’t heard that story that much. There are other stories, but those are the main ones. The other stories—I had several uncles, several of my mother’s brothers who were in World War I. They were her older brothers who were in World War I.

Crawford: How many siblings?

Wilson: I have an entire book that will lay it all out to you. But, by memory, I think the oldest one, let’s see, one was Mary, and then another one’s name was Ted, another one’s name was Ulysses, another one’s name was, can’t remember his name right now, but there must have been—I think there were nine total. I have a family history book, which answers that question.

Crawford: How about your father’s side?

Wilson: My father’s family was also large. I think there might have been ten or eleven there. But I know he was the only male that survived to adulthood. I know the exact date of his birth, December 28, 1905. But, he was the only surviving male, which meant, of that Wilson line he is the only Wilson of his particular line because he had no surviving brothers. And I am an only son. Then, my son is an only son, but he now has two sons. So my personal line of “Wilsons” has a higher probability of a future generation.

Crawford: The line goes on.

Wilson: The line goes on. So, that was the situation. So, in terms of stories, those are the ones that most immediately come to mind.

Wilmot: One thing I wanted to follow up on is that you mentioned that you were having this conversation where your father worked for a living, Benoir family. Then, you said that you went there much later. You met that family and went to that house much later and I wondered what that was—what was that occasion, how did that happen?

Wilson: Let’s see, I am trying to figure it out.

Wilmot: It may be a moot question.
Wilson: I think I had gone to the house once or twice earlier. There was some occasion; maybe we had to pick up my father or something. So, I may have gone to the house once or twice, but I really didn’t know the house. I don’t think as a youth, as a young person, I don’t think I ever went to the house. Later on I did go to the house, but that was after they moved out of this big palatial house that they owned because, as I said, the patriarch of that family died in World War II. So, their economic situation, because I don’t think Mrs. Benoir ever worked. She had children and kept the household. After her husband died, since he was not bringing in any money, there was a trust or something, but you know, the lifestyle they had really required more than that because there was no money coming in. So they bought a smaller house, out in the county. I know I never went to that house, and that was a smaller house, but my father still worked for them.

Now, Mrs. Benoir’s mother, whose name was Baker, apparently was wealthy. She, apparently had a major interest in a bank somewhere in Arkansas, interestingly enough. I think it was in Hot Springs, I remember that name, Hot Springs, Arkansas. So, because of her wealth, she was able to sustain the family. There were two daughters, I believe, and my father knew the two daughters from when they were little kids. I remember later on, when there were a couple of occasions when the St. Louis Symphony performed a piece of mine—they came to the concert. I met them there, at least once or twice. So, I did meet them again when I was an adult.

Wilmot: When you were talking about your father’s work, I wanted to learn more about your mother’s work. She also did work in people’s homes.

Wilson: She also did, occasionally. She did maybe once or twice a week, but not all the time because when we were young, she was home with us most of the time. After we were all going to school, she took a couple of jobs a couple of days a week. She worked—mainly ironing and some cleaning.

Wilmot: So it wasn’t the same strong relationship with the family that he had?

Wilson: Wasn’t the same. She had special relationships with the people; I remember one lady’s name, Mrs. Childress was one of the ladies that she worked for. On Tuesday it was one place and on Thursday it was another place. Sometimes that would change, but the person that I think she worked for longest was Mrs. Childress.

What’s interesting about that is that it wasn’t really too far away from where we lived. If you went along a major thoroughfare which was called King’s Highway—we were sort of mid-town, in the sort of center of town—if you went in this section about ten blocks south—and the major trajectory of St. Louis went from east to west from the river front out to the city limits. The African American community was primarily in the center of the town. So, as I mentioned, when we first moved there to 4851 Page, initially, that was the early part of the vanguard of African Americans living in that area. After five, ten years, by the time I was in
college, and certainly by the time I graduated college, it was an all-black community. Still, there were certain streets that were essentially barriers. That is, once you went so far south on a major trajectory, then it was primarily a white area, even though it was relatively close to an African American community.

As you kept going south, then there was an area that had very wealthy homes and large private streets. That’s one of the areas in which she worked, but it was very close. Now, of course, things have changed. And it is still a very nice area. It’s called the Central West End. Matter a fact, we were in that area when we were in St. Louis recently, because Elouise has an aunt that lives in that area. So, it was all relative. Of course, I could walk there, or certainly, ride on the bicycle. As a matter a fact, at one point, I passed a drug store where I used to work in that area. I used to be a delivery boy at that drug store, and it is no longer a drug store, but the area is still right in that section, which is around the corner from the place where the people my father worked for lived. So, both the large house of the Benoirs and the house of the Childress’ were within maybe four or five blocks of one another.

Crawford: What would you have guessed the population to be then, when you were small?

Wilson: Of the city? Well, the population of St. Louis in the 1940s was relatively large. I remember looking at maps of populations of cities, and I remember learning, as a little kid, that St. Louis was the seventh largest city in the United States. I remember that the population, at that time, was between six-hundred and seven-hundred thousand. But, that’s the center, that’s the city itself, not the greater St. Louis, you know, the suburbs. After about the sixties, the beginning of the sixties, then the population began to decline. St. Louis now, I would imagine is still probably around five-hundred to six-hundred thousand. The “Greater St. Louis,” is where you had the exposure—the growth of suburbs and the development of a large St. Louis county municipal district, which is an independent political entity, and then all of the little townships and the places around it. Greater St. Louis is probably around nine-hundred thousand, maybe a million if you consider all of that. But, St Louis itself, is probably down to around five-hundred thousand. I am guessing, I am not sure. I remember it was a high of between six-hundred thousand, seven-hundred thousand, which back in the fifties made it the seventh largest city.

St. Louis history was very important because it was the major point of departure to the west around the turn of the century. The Golden Gate—that’s why that arch still represents a symbol of promise, the hope of the west. Railroads embarked from St. Louis going as far as they could, eventually getting to San Francisco.

Crawford: And Louis and Clark started out there.

Wilson: Louis and Clark and all of the explorers, yes, I know it was a key point in Louisiana territory and all of the west. And the French population, because it was a key part of the Louisiana territory certainly put its stamp on part of it.
architecturally and culturally in many ways. It also was a place where immigrants could come up and down the Mississippi River—French immigrants, German immigrants, Italian Immigrants, and so forth have had little settlements. Although, it was never as completely balkanized as Chicago or New York, but it was balkanized. I mean there were areas which were described as—“this is the Italian area,” “this is the German area, this is the”—I guess the French area was long gone by that time. I don’t remember it.

Crawford: But recognizable neighborhoods.

Wilson: That’s right, that’s right.

Wilmot: I have a question. St. Louis was on the river on the way up to Chicago, and I was just wondering about what was St. Louis like, musically. It was also this place where different people from different backgrounds came here. People from Germany, people from—what was it like, what was the texture of that place musically?

Wilson: Well, St. Louis has a very powerful and important musical history, both in the vernacular tradition and in the written tradition. In the written tradition, because it was a major industrial or economic hub. And because it was a major port—well New Orleans was a major port, and one would go up the Mississippi River, drop goods and so forth from Europe and where ever, and then put them in trains and then they would go to the west. So, it was a key place, a lot of people, a lot of speculators made a lot of money there and the city grew. As a consequence, those settlers who came in the middle of the nineteenth century, and especially in the latter part of the nineteenth century, as this became a central, major point of embarkation going west—people were very wealthy, made a lot of money there and the city grew. As a consequence, those settlers who came in the middle of the nineteenth century, and especially in the latter part of the nineteenth century, as this became a central, major point of embarkation going west—people were very wealthy, made a lot of money, built houses, and with that brought their sense of culture. So, you have, as you have in several other places, like New Orleans—I think New Orleans may have been the first symphony orchestra in the country, or certainly, if not the first, it was one of the earliest. And then, St. Louis was also one of the earliest places where there was an orchestra in the mid-west. So, within the cultivated tradition, St. Louis has its place. I think the opera came much later, but the orchestra was important in the early part of the nineteenth century and continued to be important in the twentieth century. It still is considered one of the top ten orchestras in the country, but it was really prominent in the nineteen-forties and nineteen-fifties.

In the vernacular traditions, St. Louis is a key point in the development of several traditions. First, because of the emergence of ragtime and jazz, but also because of the emergence of blues in places like the delta of New Orleans and in other place in the south at the end of the 19th century. So, you had a lot of itinerate men traveling around, looking primarily for their family and looking for work, and that’s when the blues ideal—i.e., people with their guitar singing and reflecting on their experiences, began to emerge. And certain kinds of types of poetic poems began to emerge. Always reflecting on the past and future and certainly different form of styles began to emerge, and ultimately, the three verse style, the three line
style that we think of in basic blues, of course, where the first two repeat each other and the third one is the conclusion, emerged. But, there were other styles that existed in the Mississippi Delta, Georgia, Alabama, South Carolina, parts of Florida, and all the way west to Texas. All of this was emerging at the same time.

Crawford: What would have been the instrumentation or the distinction?

Wilson: Single instrument, guitar, homemade guitar and somebody singing. You know, sort of singing—

Crawford: No harmonica? No—

Wilson: Not much harmonica yet. Harmonica comes later on, but then the whole tradition of having harmonica and adding homemade instruments was already there. See, even before the beginning of Blues, there was a tradition of making instruments, you know. There was the tradition of taking instruments, some percussion instrument, some wind instruments, and some instruments like the harmonica and so forth were used—in slave music which was done on the plantation. There is a famous painting, dating from about 1800 called “The Old Plantation” that shows African American musicians playing, and there’s a drum they are playing, there is a banjo, and there’s also singing and dancing, you know, and bones, you know, literally hitting the bones together. So, those instruments are interesting because there are certain aspects of the tradition of music which this reflects. It is something that I refer to as the “heterogeneous sound ideal.” I’m getting away from your point but the ideal is to create music that contains sounds colors that are distinctly different from one another. And that ideal is a fundamental/principle idea that one finds in African, African derived music and music of peoples of African descent. That idea of having these sounds that clash with each other, and yet have their own distinct strata of the overall rhythmic structure of becomes a basic fundamental character of the music. You can trace that all the way back to, description of music on the coast of Africa in the fifteenth century, the sixteenth century and the seventeenth century. In all the African Diaspora, [when] people describe the music and describe the instruments, you have this same kind of characteristic.

Crawford: This clash, what you call the timbral clash, was something that sounded good to their ears.

Wilson: Exactly. It became just a bias that peoples of African descent had developed, in certain ways. There are others, and so forth. But, at any rate, the point was that in the development of the Blues, you found people moving up and down the Mississippi River working on the barges, and then hopping off wherever they could, and getting other labor jobs, and carrying this musical style. So, this Blues, this transmission of the blues from the South to the North, went through places like St. Louis.
Now, there are a couple of other things that are really dramatic in that, one is ragtime. Ragtime, of course, evolved around the 1880’s.

Crawford:  [Scott] Joplin came from Missouri, didn’t he?

Wilson:  Joplin is from Texarkana, but he spent a lot of time in St. Louis and a lot of time in Sedalia, Missouri. “Maple Leaf Rag” was written in Sedalia, Missouri. So, you the Mississippi river, and people travelling up and down the river, and the style that we think of as ragtime, evolved around the 1880’s in places like St. Louis and other river ports. One of the reasons why it developed there was that a lot of work was associated with the river; it was the major means of transferring goods and services up and down the river. And there were a lot of itinerant workers going there. And these people who are itinerant workers, you know, what are you going to do? People began to develop little honky-tonks. Little honky-tonks, and people came, and one of the instruments that one found was the piano. And you found people who were itinerant players, who would move from place to place, and of playing this music, which sounded a little bit like some of the music that people associated with some of the slave music before, a great deal of the syncopation and so forth. But it had musical forms, musical structures that were often based on marches. Now, marches were extremely important because this was part of the French Louisiana Territory. Going back to Napoleon, the whole idea was to promote the grandeur of France and the military bands and all of that. So, wherever you had a French Garrison, you had a band with this great elaborate designed costumes and drums, and that kind of thing. So you had this tradition of all of these military bands doing at posts, little garrisons that the French had, trying to control the territory. That musical form—and there were musical structures, you know, the trio form, minuet trio, minuet, or march trio march.[pounds table with his hand to demonstrate] That was the basic form. So, the kinds of musical forms that these itinerant players, who were exposed to that, began to use were those forms.

Now, there is another important relationship of African Americans who were musicians and military bands. Part of it has to do—well I have some speculation about that—but the fact of the matter is that from the beginning of the United States and before, even during the colonial periods, it was discovered that Europeans were fascinated by this music that African people would perform. So, if you look at the chroniclers of people writing about life at that time, invariably, if they talked about music, they talked about African American slaves making this music, which was fascinating. Thomas Jefferson, in his “Notes on Virginia,” is one of the most famous observers of this music. Jefferson was very complex—well on one hand, he was Thomas Jefferson the great egalitarian, and on the other one, he was Thomas Jefferson the slave owner, and on the other hand, he was Thomas Jefferson who really had some basic fundamental racist views.

Crawford:  Early on he did, and that’s where it was expressed wasn’t it.
Wilson: Exactly, so in “Notes on Virginia,” he talks about musicians. He says, Blacks seem to have a great sense of, to use his words, “time and tune,” in terms of music, in terms of the indigenous music that they produce. He says Blacks seem to be particularly good at this. Then he goes on further and says—but “whether or not it will be shown that they can write—they can create music of greater length and greater complexity remains to be seen.”

Now, that with the fact that in the colonial military units that they had, and then later on during the war for independence, the two roles that male blacks were allowed to have in service were either as stewards, servants—often when people went to war they would take their servants with them. I mean, they weren’t going to clean those guns. They’d go and take a couple of servants to go with them and make sure that their uniforms were clean and so forth. So, the servants were there taking care of the people. But also, the other thing that they were allowed to do, was to be musicians. So, the fife and drum, which are associated with the colonial military, often had black drummers and black fifers, you know, so that was a characteristic thing. Some famous paintings have shown that.

All of that was to say is that by the middle of the century, blacks associated with popular music was well established, slaves or non-slaves, providing music for whites for entertainment was very well established. So, even in the slave context, there were situations where there was slavery in the plantation; people would hire bands to play the European music of the time, cotillions and whatever. But then, if they wanted to have a really good time, they would bring blacks to play music for them. So, you would have blacks playing these instruments, sometimes European music, sometimes European instruments, sometimes even European music because you also had some white masters who found that they had a black servant or black person that worked for them who seemed to have talent, and they would teach them music. So, you even have, especially in New England in the colonial periods, blacks who were music masters, dance masters. You know, even music teachers.

Crawford: There was music in the homes.

Wilson: That’s right, music in the homes, that was the major place it was. And so they would sometimes take the very talented black, and some music master would say “Okay, good, I will teach you this,” and he would learn European classical music, and then he would teach it to people. That was a long tradition, especially in New England where there were black music masters, and because people considered them good. In the vernacular tradition, the non-written tradition, they were also just itinerant people, people who didn’t read or write music, but were very good at doing it, and especially doing the popular music, the dance music.

So, the slave music, which then becomes music to dance for in the plantation houses, and then it becomes music that has different qualities, and ragtime is one of those things that developed at the end of the nineteenth century, after following a tradition that had started earlier on. But what is interesting about ragtime, as
opposed to all that other music, is that ragtime becomes a published music. So, you had African American composers actually writing it down. [Phone rings, answering machine picks up.]

There were a few other people like that earlier. There was somebody who—I don’t want to give this whole history but—

Crawford: It was hugely popular, wasn’t it?

Wilson: Yes, extraordinarily popular. Before ragtime there was other written music. A famous person in Philadelphia, his name was Francis Johnson, did that. So, you had that kind of thing going on.

[interruption]

So, you have this tradition of blacks creating music for whites, both formal music and informal music. It is the informal music that, of course, leads to—blacks are very successful in doing it, and then whites begin to look at blacks doing it, and begin to do it. That becomes the beginning of minstrel music. So, it is whites imitating blacks. That was the first American popular music. Minstrel music is the first indigenous music, certainly the first popular music, music produced for financial gain. It was based on a caricature of African Americans. It was also in the service of the Confederate ideal because the ideal was “happy darkies” enjoy this. I mean, the old plantation—and there is another famous painting, that one right there [points to painting on wall]—but happy darkies enjoy this, and so they are happy being slaves and so forth, so it was part of that ideology.

Wilmot: I see that book on your book shelf, For Love and Theft [Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class by Eric Lott], which is a book about that tradition.

Wilson: Right. Yes, but then ragtime comes on later on. Classic ragtime is a little bit different in that it is written down—actually some of the minstrel music is written down. And it sort of coincides with the growth of blacks doing minstrel music.

White minstrelsy was so popular. It started in the 1820s, 1830s, and 1840s, probably its heyday, and, of course, this was also, I mean Dixie, by [Dan Emmett?], who was a very strong supporter of the Confederacy, you know, [sings] “wish I was in the land of cotton, la da da,” you know everybody knows Dixie. Well, Dixie was also a rallying cry for the Confederacy.

There were other stereotypes and prototypes of figures as part of the minstrelsy. But because it was so successful, blacks begin to do it at the end of the Civil War, 1865. One of the earliest black groups, minstrel groups, was George Hicks. Genetics being what it is, some blacks weren’t black enough, so that they also darkened their face to be black enough, and with the big lips and so forth. So, then they began to perform, and so it was like well if you can caricature us, we can do it better! So, they were in this horrible situation of imitating, mimicking
themselves. It was for financial gain. Then it creates this dilemma, and it becomes one of the first models of black entertainers, so much so that it is still with us today. Some of the black comedy that you see on TV is simply watered down minstrelsy. I mean, it is really horrible stuff.

So that was all part of it. It gave blacks an opportunity to be on the stage, and that eventually evolves to black musical comedy in theatre. Now a new genre that fit into that was ragtime because ragtime was this music that was produced in these honky-tonks, primarily up and down the Mississippi River. And, people would play this music, this syncopated music, based often in the forms of the dance because of where it was. But with these qualities of syncopation, you know, which were more characteristic of the slave music that happened before. And, putting that together and building a new hybrid of something that really works. And then some of the blacks had studied Western music too. Things being the way they were in places like New Orleans or Charleston, South Carolina, where there was a black middle class, and the black mulattos and so forth, all those, I think we alluded a little bit to that last time. Some of these people, you know, had studied formally western music, so you had them bringing their skills with the skills of the people who just learned it from just practicing and just watching people. So, you had that and then you had the development of ragtime. That, then influenced, dominated sort of popular music, especially around the turn of the century. I mean, “Maple Leaf Rag “was 1897, 1898 and of course, it was very successful.

Joplin was successful because he moved—he lived in Texarkana, he sang in one of those quartets. It was a family quartet; it was his brothers and some other guys. They were teenagers, and they went around singing this quartet music. This quartet music goes all the way back to itinerant black groups going around and singing for financial gain, goes back to the 1860, 1871, The Fisk Jubilee singers tour, you know, that was sort of raising money for the school. But then, people saw this form was working well so a lot of people started doing it, people that had nothing to do with any school, and who would sing whatever they knew, and would simply put it together and call themselves some kind of singers so that people thought that they were authentic singers, singing slave music that was from some particular area. Some of them were, and the music that they sang, some of which had its origin in slavery, but some of it was just made up then, and because it was successful. But it had these basic qualities that we talk about, that you associate with this black popular music.

Joplin started a singing group like that, started travelling around. Then, he moved to St. Louis, and in 1893 he went to—there was this famous World’s Fair in Chicago, and you know, this is where you have the combination of a wide range of different kinds of music around the end of the century. This emerging ragtime was part of the music; the new kind of blues, you know, country blues, was part of this music that was on the outskirts and everything else.
Crawford: And interesting that he wrote an opera! And I’ve have seen that opera, “Treemonisha.”

Wilson: That’s right. He wrote the opera in 1917. No, he wrote “Treemonisha” a little bit earlier.

Crawford: Was that a common thing?

Wilson: No, very uncommon, very uncommon. This is the story about Joplin. Joplin goes out in 1893, he is a work-a-day kind of itinerant musician, playing honky-tonk bars up and down the Mississippi. Got up as far as Chicago, played in 1893, came back—and when he got there to Chicago, he met some musicians, some black musicians, who were learned musicians, you know, who could read better than he could. So, he began to try to study, to read himself because he figured if he could write his own music—because early on, what you would do is you would go to somebody else and they would write it down, at least enough of it down. They would, of course, change it because, you know, a lot of things they couldn’t exactly notate right, so they wrote it the best way so it would sound something like this. So, then Joplin moved to Sedalia, Missouri. Now, he moved to Sedalia, Missouri because that was a place where there was a black college at the time. The black college, like many of the black colleges after the Civil War, was established by missionaries, and also, people who had been involved in the abolitionist movement. So, he went to this Johnson College for Negroes [George R. Smith College], or whatever it was called at that time in Sedalia, that’s why he moved to Sedalia, and he studied music. So, he studied music formally, there.

Crawford: That’s why, that’s what promoted that—

Wilson: That’s what promoted it because he had studied music formally. He also, in Sedalia, met a white publisher who was there. There was a club called the Maple Leaf Club, and he went to that Maple Leaf Club, and that publisher, whose name I forget right now, was a white guy, who was really interested in this music, and he also treated Joplin, certainly better than most blacks were treated at that time in terms of the business side of it. So, he agreed to publish Joplin’s music and give him a reasonable sum. So, Joplin became wealthy because once Maple Leaf Rag became a big hit and he wrote a whole series of other rags, and published them, Joplin became very, very wealthy. Then, Joplin left Sedalia, he moved back to St. Louis again, bought a very nice house, and ultimately moved to New York.

Crawford: Were you aware of this history when you were growing up? You didn’t hear, you certainly didn’t hear—

Wilson: Well, I didn’t hear that. I was aware of ragtime because this was St. Louis, and there were still some people who played this old style. I mean, I was born in 1937, so about when I am ten years old, there were still some people around who were like fifty or sixty, and playing that old style.
Crawford: But, you didn’t hear ragtime in the forties, was it popular? I think it had lost it’s—

Wilson: Yes, in certain circles. It had lost its dominant popularity. But in St. Louis, there were still people who played ragtime, and there were still places that had that old style. There were restaurants that featured the gay nineties kind of style, and that’s what they would play. But, now the other place that it was—played was in the private parlor. We always think of ragtime as being primarily keyboard music and it is—you know the written music to be played by people in their home on their piano. But ragtime was also played in a small band format. So, most of these band played on the riverboats, up and down the Mississippi River. Now, that was still going on when I was a kid.

I remember there was a black musicians’ union in St. Louis, and there were people in that musicians’ union who made a living by playing on those boats. There was a very famous person, at the time who played tuba and had his ragtime band. His name was “Singleton Palmer.” He continued to play on those boats and in other similar venues all during that period, and everybody knew this guy was an excellent musician. Now, the other thing that happened was the development of jazz, early jazz, which grows out of ragtime and blues. For some people they couldn’t tell—you know, a lot of people don’t listen very carefully—and they couldn’t tell, what was ragtime or blues? You also had an explosion in the forties of a certain kind of jazz, so called Dixieland Jazz, which is really a variant of early jazz, and so forth. Dixieland Jazz also had its own following. So, you had primarily black, some blacks, although mostly blacks were playing then, jazz which was early jazz, New Orleans jazz, and the major exponent was King Oliver, Louis Armstrong and so forth. But, you also had a few of those people who played the early jazz that featured the solo less and had more of the collective improvisation. Then, you had primarily white groups who played the Dixieland jazz.

Crawford: And, who were the audiences for those various kinds of jazz?

Wilson: Well, the riverboats, there were special clubs that specialized in the “Old South” culture, the New Orleans idea, and so you had that going on. Since there had been jazz clubs in places like St. Louis and Chicago, going back to the 1920s, when you had a lot of the jazz players leaving New Orleans and moving up the river to places like Chicago and St. Louis, and then from Chicago to New York. You had some people who continued this older jazz and didn’t like this newer jazz that was developing in the forties. So, you had the aficionados of the early jazz, the Louis Armstrong and the Dixieland jazz people, and on the other hand, you had the new jazz that was beginning to develop in the forties, the modern jazz. So, you always had this cultural battle going on.

Crawford: That was one of my questions, when you first heard modern jazz? But, I would like to know what your parents played, what you heard coming off the radio? Radio is important.
Wilson:

Right, the radio, interesting because in the African American community, the popular music that we heard, primarily, was the popular music that everybody else heard because that was the only thing on the radio. That is, I guess you had people like Sammy Kaye—see in the big band era, you would have people like that. You would have singers, and I guess early Frank Sinatra, you know, and Patti Page, can you remember that, “How much is that Doggy?” and Rosemary Clooney. So, that was the basic stuff that was on the radio, but then you also had would hear, if you stayed up late at night, there was a tradition of having big band jazz, which sort of came out of the—after the early New Orleans jazz, and before the modern jazz, was this big band jazz. So, you had people—the most famous, were Duke Ellington, Count Basie, but you also had Benny Goodman and you know, as one style sort of real jazz players. Then, you had people like Lawrence Welk, you know who were considered by my corny friends.

Crawford: That was later.

Wilson: Yes, that was later, but there were people like Lawrence Welk, who played all the time a watered-down kind of jazz.

Crawford: Weren’t there symphonic broadcasts? Were you exposed to those?

Wilson: Yes, there were symphonic broadcasts going back to 1924, I mean, Paul Whiteman, and that kind of thing. And Rhapsody in Blue was part of that famous [Aeolian?] Hall concert, and so you have the kind of people who, ostensibly, were making a “lady out of jazz.”

Crawford: I love it, that’s great. I never heard that before.[laughs]

Wilson: Oh yeah, he literally said “We are going to make a lady out of jazz.”

Wilmot: What was she before?

Wilson: Oh, I don’t know, she was not hardly a lady. Because jazz was associated with a good time, and in the early days of New Orleans, I mean, a lot of these rag players who then switched over to playing jazz—there’s a slight difference in feeling of it—often, this music was done in whorehouses and so forth. So, it was associated with that, it was associated with a fast, decadent kind of life.

Crawford: Were your parents okay with that, did they encourage you to—?

Wilson: Well, by the time I came along, in nineteen thirty-seven, what happens is that jazz had long since become a nice and big thing. In the African American community it enjoyed the status of a hero because this is after the emergence of Duke Ellington. And what Duke Ellington’s importance is, is that he changed the image of jazz from being associated with that minstrelsy tradition, you know, that we
talked about earlier, to being very, very, very desirable. In the sense that that band wore impeccable suits; the people were well dressed; they were sharp; they were sophisticated; they were urbane. And they were wealthy by African American standards! I mean, they rolled around in private trains—they had to ride in private cars because things were segregated so they had them all together. The car would be attached to that, and they would go all over the country. They would get out, play their job, and get back on.

But, everybody thought these guys were beautiful, you know, and they showed “sartorial splendor” and all of that stuff. Duke Ellington was always very careful about what he said and how he said it, and was handsome, and everybody wanted to be with Duke Ellington. So, by the time you get to the forties, you get, “Jazz is cool!” I mean, you’ve got everything in African American music, from minstrelsy, you know, which is old fashioned, old style, “old Negro” kind of thing, to the manifestation of the New Negro from the 1920s seen embodied in Duke Ellington. Duke Ellington, people think of Duke Ellington as being a Harlem Renaissance type of creation. Actually he comes before that, and is consistent and concurrent with that. But he represents a new ideal, Alain Locke’s idea of the New Negro, you know, that was Duke Ellington because he was urbane; he knows how to talk; he is sophisticated; he’s not backward or ignorant.

Crawford: You are saying that the Harlem Renaissance preceded that.

Wilson: The Harlem Renaissance, yes, preceded that, and also as well coincided with that. So, by the time the thirties come in the person of the big band, it’s a good, positive image. So, if you were a musician and you could work, you could get a job, you made more money than the average person working as a porter and you had more fun. [laughs] So, thousands of people really aspired to be in this life because this was the heyday of the big bands. Now, when the big bands began to have trouble, and you couldn’t support, Duke Ellington, Count Basie, and ten or fifteen other bands that existed, and then all the smaller bands in regional areas that existed, when one could no longer make a living that way because a lot of the places are closed down, then a lot of these bands folded. And only the very best and the most famous like Duke Ellington and Count Basie existed. But, I started talking about this in response to your question about what was on the radio.

You had, in the radios in the 1940s, you had Earl “Fatha” Hines broadcasting from the Chicago Terrace Hotel. You had Duke Ellington, in the earlier 1930s, broadcasting from the Cotton Club. You had, occasionally, Count Basie broadcasting. You had occasionally, other bands playing and broadcasting, so late at night, you could tune in and you could hear some of this music. So, that was possible. The other thing is that in my own lifetime, I may have heard that once or twice because it was getting near its end, and the new music, the new modern jazz was coming in.

Crawford: Who did you first hear, do you remember? Did you hear Ornette Coleman?
Wilson: Oh no, Ornette was much later.

Crawford: That was later, that was the sixties.

Wilson: But, Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie, I mean yes, those were our models, our gods. Those were the people that we really were interested in. Now, you see, because I am a teenager, I go to high school in 1951—Charlie Parker, the exposure to bebop occurred, the earliest I guess people put it anywhere from about 1941, up through, and continuing, up to about 1955, the first bebop.

Crawford: You liked what you heard?

Wilson: Yes, I mean, that’s what we wanted to do, that’s what we wanted to play because we recognized immediately, this was challenging music to play, to hear, to create, and also it became a symbol of resistance. I mean, you can read it a number of different ways, but one of the ways you can read it is that this is music that eschews the showmanship that was associated with big bands, which some people saw as being still a continuation of the minstrel tradition. At the same time, it was music that looked inward, as opposed to looking outward. In certain ways it went back to some of the most salient characteristics of African American music in terms of how it focused on things. And at the same time, it was informed by much more complexity in terms of its harmonic organization, in terms of its rhythmic organization, in terms of its timbral organization. So, all of this made this very challenging because it was challenging music. It was the kind of music that many people who liked to listen to melodies said, “Where’s the melody? I don’t know where the melody is—I don’t like this stuff, it sounds crazy.” But, the aficionados—there was also kind of a sense of being unique. The detractors called it “cult music;” the people who really admired it called it “hip music” or “insider’s music.” Because you had to understand what people were trying to do. Also developed with this was a certain lingo, the cool, the bebop style, the hats and the so forth. All of that, the berets, and the little—and the thick glasses, and all of that was very, very cool, very, very urbane.

Wilmot: Were you keying into this? I had read in a previous interview that you were performing with various groups in high school and college. Were you keying into this at this time?

Wilson: Absolutely, this was the ideal of what we wanted to try to do.

Wilmot: Your style?

Wilson: Well, probably a little a little tam; I had a little tam.

Wilmot: Pegged pants?

Wilson: Yeah, but, you see, styles change so quickly. Now, the big heyday of those, let’s say, cat pants and the berets and the glasses and all that. First place, it depends on
who was doing it. The two leaders of the bebop movement were Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie. Charlie Parker was, ironically, a very serious individual about his music. Though he was plagued by his addiction, and it made him become a very, very irresponsible person in many regards. But, yet when he was sober, when he was clean, he was really just an extraordinary individual, you know, he was very serious about his music and he was sort of anti-entertainment. Dizzy Gillespie, on the other hand, was a natural comedian, was a warm person, of exuberantly, outgoing personality characteristics in his life and what he did and how he did it. He really pushed this sort of special language, rebop and bebop, and scoobabedoodoobedo, you know, oo ya koo and all kinds of utterances that were associated with the music.

So, it became that cult idea that was associated more with Dizzy Gillespie, although Parker, he played bebop was that, too. Now this is really heavy during the war. Okay, during the war, I am still a little kid. So, I wasn’t in that style, and by the time I am old enough to really sort of play gigs, I graduated from grade school in 1951, so I must have been 13 or 14, or something like that. It is then, in high school, freshman, sophomore, junior, and certainly by the junior year I was playing, and then I started playing gigs and so forth. We were trying to play bebop, but the music we could play easiest and fastest, and what we got gigs for playing was what we call “rhythm and blues,” early rhythm and blues, you know, the jug bands, you know. So, we are playing the sort of pop music cause that’s what people wanted to hear. We were playing little gigs playing that. But, what we tried to practice and work on was jazz, and whenever we were playing a gig where we could, we would play a jazz number that we knew, and so forth. But, that’s really what we thought of ourselves as being. What we really were playing, for the most part, was the popular music, because that’s what it was.

Wilmot: Who was hiring you? Or where did you play, rather?

Wilson: Usually “little hole in the wall places.” I remember one of the earliest times I played somewhere was over in—it was a crazy band, I mean it was a band consisting of fifteen, not that many, maybe five or six [conga?] and bongo players and one piano player. I must have been about a sophomore or something like that in high school then. And we may have had a bass, but it was mainly the drums and the piano. We were playing sort of quasi-Latino bebop stuff. Since I was on the piano, I would play a couple of little riff things and the drums would keep the rhythm, and we would just play. I remember the melody of a couple of tunes, and we would play that enough and we could get through it. This this gig that I remember, was over in the Italian neighborhood, and for whatever reason, often the people in the Italian neighborhood liked this music, so they would hire a band, and I don’t even know how, I guess somebody, one of the [conga?] players or something, who may have been a few years older knew somebody and said, “Hey, look I will bring a band over to this little club.” So there’s a little club, and we went over and we played. We played for a couple hours and took a little break and played for another hour or so.
I was not in the union or anything then, and so, we didn’t even know how much we were going to get paid, but I think, at the end of the evening the probably gave us a couple bottles of beer or something, so it was basically our introduction into the world of business, you know. I must have been fifteen, sixteen or something like that then. And then, later on, we got more organized. The instrumentation was, usually, at least one saxophone, drums, piano and bass.

Crawford: What was the situation with the union?

Wilson: The union didn’t like us. As a matter of fact, before I was in the union, we played in places and if there was anybody who was in the union who played with us, then they would get—the union would have people who would go around from place to place and peep in the door to see who was playing there, and if they saw someone who was not a union member—or this was a non-union band, they would fine the union band members. They would also try to fine the place or tell the place that they weren’t going to allow union bands to play there. But we were teenagers, and these were obscure little bars.

Crawford: You didn’t feel terrified that there was going to be a raid and you were going to be fined?

Wilson: No, no, no, because the place was so small. Later on, when we were more organized, and had a regular band, we joined the union.

Crawford: When was that?

Wilson: I must have been in college then. I don’t think I joined the union before I went to college. But when I went to college, and was trying to play on a regular basis Friday and Saturday nights, with a band that had a job and a contract, then we knew how much we were going to get paid.

Crawford: So, it was advantageous?

Wilson: It was advantageous to play with the union. And then we were always concerned because every now and then somebody was supposed to be there couldn’t come, and we had to get whomever we could find, even if they were not a member of the union. However we would all get fined if the union representative came walking around that evening. But, the kind of music that we played was early rhythm and blues, a lot of shuffle, dadadadadadada [sings ascending bar of music], that kind of thing, blues patterns, blues harmonic patterns, and a lot of popular songs that were based on that because a lot of the songs at that time were based on those things. And then ballads, popular ballads, you would figure out how to perform.

Crawford: For dancing?
Wilson: Yes, for dancing, and for background music. So, that’s what we played. After we did it for a while, we got a little bit better, we actually practiced sometimes, and then we got to play with better musicians and then you got better and so forth.

Wilmot: I remember reading in the Yale interview that you played with Chuck Berry, who was from St. Louis. You know, I was named after that song, “Nadine.”

Wilson: I didn’t know that. [laughter]

Crawford: She just told me that, too. [laughter]

Wilson: And “Maybelline, why can’t you be true” [sings]

Yeah, no, because these were little places, one day we were playing in this little bar, and it was our band and there was a friend by the name of Verne Harold, who played saxophone. I played piano. We had a lot of different drummers—I can’t even remember their names, and we had a bass player. Now, all these people were older than me. I mean, I was about, by this time, eighteen, nineteen. I was in college and knew enough and played enough of a repertoire that I could play that. Then, also, we had fake books, too. You know, you could read the chord change if it was a tune that you didn’t know and make it through it. Well, these were usually little bars, primarily, again, over on the south side of town, which was primarily an Italian neighborhood. Occasionally, we would play in black places, but most of the time it was in an Italian neighborhood because these were local places. At the black places, they would usually have much more experienced bands, and much bigger names, and you aspired eventually to play in these clubs because there was a much more fastidious audience.

And, one day, in one of these smaller places where we were regulars, the owner said, “Well, we are going to have a guest, and the guest is going to be this new star, Chuck Berry,” who lived in St. Louis, and who was just beginning—I think he had a couple of hits. “So, he is going to come in, and you’ll be the house band and you will backup Chuck Berry.” So, we said, “Okay.” We knew his music, like “Maybelline,” and it was basically a simple change, and we could figure out what to do. Chuck Berry would come, and when he came in, he had his big pompadour hair style and he also had his guitar with an amplifier. Now, this was an important, critical time because we were playing essentially acoustical instruments; there was no electronic piano; it was drums, bass, saxophone that was played in the microphone and so forth. So, that was it.

So, Chuck Berry comes in, and he sets his thing and it goes “thong blah” [shouts] the whole thing is real loud. We’re going “Oh.” We’re looking around. So, then he starts off, kicking off his tune. Well, you know, it was kind of shuffle. So we played, but it really didn’t make any difference because you couldn’t hear us. He just wiped us out, bang bang, bang, on his guitar.

Crawford: He didn’t need a bit of backup, did he?
Wilson: He didn’t need anything! Except the drums. I mean, the drums because the drums are all you could hear. So, we just banged anything and said “what the heck, it doesn’t make any difference.” So, this went on for about a month, you know, playing. Chuck Berry was the headliner, would come in at about nine or ten o’clock. We would play the first set, and then he would come on at nine or ten o’clock. Then, he would invariably get out and do his duck-walk that he later became very famous for, and everybody would go crazy. All the women in particular would go, “Aaaah!” [imitates women shrieking], and we said, “what is this?” Because we considered that silly music because we were jazz aficionados, and that’s what we really wanted to do. This just gave us the fifteen bucks—what did we make, ten bucks, fifteen buck a night?

Crawford: It didn’t make you feel like celebrities?

Wilson: No, no! Well, I mean, you know, not at the time. I mean, Chuck Berry was Chuck Berry, but still Chuck Berry was not an icon at that time. He was on the radio, but there were a lot of other people who were on the radio. Nobody knew he was going to become even more, and have a series of that. Even if he did, I don’t think we would have wanted to do that. We wanted to play like Charlie Parker, Miles Davis, or something like that. I mean, people we considered really strong musicians. Chuck Berry and that group was a phenomenon, you know, a different kind of phenomenon about something else. So, it was something that we did, and it was good because we kept getting paid for it. But, you know, I mean, Chuck Berry didn’t have a band at that point. It was just whoever was the house band that played behind him. So, that was the experience, but it was an experience to have, to have been in the kind of milieu in which one night there is Chuck Berry, and then the next night we would go out and try to sneak in where Charlie Parker was playing, at the Glass Bar, which was a jazz club, in St. Louis, at the time. And that’s where you could hear Charlie Parker and Miles Davis, and Lester Young, and all of those famous players would come there. And that’s where we, as teenagers, would try to sneak in.

Crawford: Now you weren’t of age?

Wilson: No, I was sixteen, seventeen.

Now, the other thing that was happening, another popular music foray was—there was a big club in St. Louis. There were several, but the biggest one in my youth, my teenage years, was called “Club Riviera.” The Club Riviera was located in the predominantly black neighborhood. It was a very large club, very nice, and it had shows, I guess three or four times a week. The house band there was the George Hudson Band, and this was a big band in the style of the Duke Ellington. It played for the house shows and it played for the singers. There were famous singers who would come through and perform at the club. There also would be shake dancers periodically, and there would be comedians and other performers. And the band wore very fancy uniforms, and it was the elite band because it would imitate the Duke Ellington style. It also was a band that many of the educators who played
music, who taught music in the public schools, and were sophisticated, educated musicians, would love to be associated with. I remember when I was in the university and I thought I was going to be a band director, so I was studying music education, and I did practice teaching out in the suburbs. The assistant band director there was a man who was the bass player for the George Hudson Band, and because of that—he knew I was interested in music—he said “Look, Olly, we are going to play this Saturday, would you like to come out and you can come and see what happens, see how we do it?” So, I went to a rehearsal, and then I went and got to sit up with the band. I didn’t actually play, because they had a regular pianist, but I did get to observe them and go backstage and hang out with the musicians. Now, that was really a crowning moment because these were really professionals, solid musicians who could read extremely well, while also playing well. They could do this music, and this band paid well, so these people, who were educators and at the same time played in the band had the best of both worlds because they didn’t have to travel because this was a house band. And so that was all part of the tradition. So, it was in that milieu that you begin to see a lot of things. That was considered the top—they clearly were the top band. That band, and there was another similar band called the “Hayes Pillars Band” that was also active there.

Now, these were the kinds of musicians that were the backbone of the union. And in St. Louis, still, there was this segregation: white union, black union.

Crawford: What was the year that the union integrated?

Wilson: Must have been up until the 1960s. Must have been about 1964, probably around that time, something like that. It happened about the 1960s because I remember that even after 1954 there still were the two unions. And, then the black union had a house, a union house, which was also interesting because in the house there were musicians who had graduate degrees in music and so forth. Occasionally, they would put together a chamber ensemble or something, and they would get people to come and play. So, as a good clarinet player, from high school, I was sometimes asked to play in sort of the concert band or the concert ensemble, playing clarinet. So, it was an interesting experiment. In that house though, you would find the intersection of people who played like Charlie Parker, very much on the cutting edge of bebop; you had a lot of the big band players; you had people like Singleton Palmer, who played old ragtime; and it was a place where legendary musicians would visit. So, you would get to see that union. You would also have church musicians, occasionally, who would also be involved in that. Among these church musicians were some gospel players. So, you would come in contact with people. Now there weren’t that many gospel players in the union because they played in church, and they didn’t have to be in the union.

Crawford: Were there any gospel quartets or anything similar?

Wilson: Not so much. The only people who did gospel were people who did both. That is, they played that and then they played that, mainly instrumentalists. The church
scene was different because you had all of these musicians who were actively involved in making church music. There were two kinds. There were the cultivated and you know, the ones—people who had learned how to read and write—the literate musicians and the illiterate musicians in terms of musical literacy. So, some of the most extraordinary gospel players were the people who never read just had phenomenal ears and just played and just sang, and you know.

It was always difficult because I didn’t have perfect pitch. Did I talk about my involvement in the church?

Crawford: Oh, yes, you did.

Wilson: Well, when I was playing for the church and the gospel choir would sing, and I would have to try to figure out where they were singing, and stumble along until I figured out the right key. Now, once you found the right key, and sometimes it would be C sharp major or C sharp—I mean these crazy keys, F sharp.

Crawford: I was going to ask you about that. You didn’t have any trouble with jazz, did you?

Wilson: No, I mean, I had to work at it. I eventually became reasonably competent, but I never considered myself a really formidable jazz musician. I figured myself a decent jazz—I could hold my own. That was because there were so many formidable, I mean, really, really extraordinary jazz musicians. “As long as you can make sure that you can hold your own, that was okay.” That’s what I aspired to, and maybe if I practiced twelve hours a day, I might have gotten to the level of the elite. [laughs]

Crawford: So, at that point in your life, that’s really what you were looking at.

Wilson: Yeah, I was looking at that, but I don’t think—because at an early age, I was exposed to senior, to older jazz musicians because I was usually the little kid playing with these older men. I could see the lifestyle was not something I really wanted. I came from a very, middle class family, with middle class aspirations, and those values were fundamental to me. Some of the people I was playing with were, you know, out there, and living the life. [laughter]

I remember one bass player we played with, I can’t even think of his name anymore, but this is a guy—I must have been seventeen, eighteen about that time—and he had to be about forty. He had a house; he lived in kind of a garage, sort of a garage that was rehabilitated. We used to practice at his house because he had a piano, and only he was there so we would go over to his house to practice. Every now and then the older guys would pass a little marijuana around, you know, because that was the thing to do. I never did like the smell that much, and I was pretty young and I was a little concerned. I didn’t want to get caught; I didn’t want to get in any trouble about that; my father would have killed me.
I liked the scene. But I knew, that uh uh, they had invested too much in me, and I couldn’t. If I had been phenomenal, a phenomenal player, if I had been what I considered to be the best in town, and I knew I could make it, then it would have been different. I was a good player, but I wasn’t the best, and I knew I wasn’t the best. So, as a result, I said well, it would be crazy trying to go out there and do this. And the idea of education had been drilled into me from the time one.

Crawford: You knew higher education was in order.

Wilson: I knew I had to finish college. There wasn’t any question about it. My parents said, “You will finish college.” So, therefore, playing jazz was something I enjoyed, something I wanted to do, but it wasn’t something that I aspired to do as a profession, at that point. I think there were a lot of people like me. Then, there were others for whom—this was their only thing, this is what they were waiting for, what they lived for. Those who were extraordinarily good did that. Some of them did quite well.

Wilmot: I know that when you were playing, you know, in St. Louis, and you were playing different gigs, that was also when you were in college. I was wondering if you could shift a little to talk about your college years?

Crawford: Good idea. That’s good. I’m there.

Wilson: Sure, right. Well, what happened is that I go to college. Now, how and why I go college is important, I won’t go—

Crawford: We talked a little about that, the Supreme Court decision and the fact that you—

Wilson: Exactly, right, so we already did that. So, I am going to Washington University. I was in the vanguard of African American students there. So to me, the “Jackie Robinson Syndrome” is very, very important. You know, you can’t be just as good, you’ve have to be better. You know, you have to be better than the average person, and that was also drilled into me So, I felt pretty confident by then because in high school I had always done well academically; I was president of the honor society. I always wanted to be two things; I always wanted to do well in school, and I also wanted to be cool. Now that’s a whole explanation about being cool—the style, the thing, and being a popular person and being cool, having the savoir faire, knowing what to do and when to do it, and being confident and so forth. So, I always wanted to be that. So, I go to Washington University.

Wilmot: You’re still cool. [laughter]

Wilson: Okay, well I’m still trying. Still trying, still trying. [smiles]

Okay, so then I go to Washington University. Well, first there was the race thing. How are you going to fit in because up to that point, all of my education had been in all black situations. I never had any problem like that because as I mentioned,
Sumner High was a good, big school. As a result, I discovered very, very early that peoples of African descent were smart, dumb, and indifferent, you know. I mean there were some who were very bright, there were some who were very slow, and like most people, most were in the middle. So, it wasn’t a big deal. But, when you went from an all-black environment to a predominantly white one, you had heard these overtones like, “This is not good enough, your standards are not high enough.” Now, I didn’t believe that, but you know if you had been reading that all your life, you approach it with a certain amount of trepidation. But I, by that time, was pretty confident. There had been enough overtures—for example, when I was in high school, there was something called the All City Band. They brought blacks and whites together, and we played and I felt, “okay, they play like I play, some are better, some are not so good,” and so forth. So, that didn’t bother me. And then, there was a standard academic test that we took, and I did well on those so I said, “okay, I feel comfortable.”

I went to Washington University, and, you know, the first semester I was concerned about how I was going to do, but when the first grades came out, I did well. So, I said, “Okay, I can do this.” So, it wasn’t a problem. And, then I was a music major. So, within the music major, in performance, Washington University’s Music department is like Berkeley’s and like Harvard’s and like most of the Ivy League schools, where the focus was not so much on performance—although if you could perform that was great—but the focus was really on the cognitive side of music. A lot of music theory, a lot of history and so forth. And they sort of modeled themselves after Harvard, that was part of the reason for that. And the music department was relatively new.

The head of the music department was a man by the name of Leigh Gerdine, who had been a Rhodes Scholar, was really from North Dakota, but you would have thought that he was from England, you know. He was very suave, an excellent fundraiser, knew the wealthy around town, and was well known in higher society. As a matter of fact, he was so good at raising funds that he got somebody immediately to give the University millions of dollars to build the Gaylord Library. Because the department was founded in a building that had been a private residence on this famous street called Forsythe Street and then the University expanded. It was right across the street from the University and it became part of the University. Then, the University bought more property around there. This expansion started right before I got there. So, when I got there in 1955, it was developing. And the music department was small, and most of the people were fair and honest, so I did well.

I studied music theory. This is where the transition to composition comes. I went there thinking that I’m going to be a music something, probably a band director, because my mentor in high school was the band teacher Clarence Hayden Wilson. So, I get there and I’m taking the proscribed program. But I come to a registration day and was told, “Okay, everybody has to study an instrument, even though we don’t focus on the Conservatory, you have to have a major instrument. You can take one instrument for two hours, or you can take two different instruments for
one hour.” Now, I had been playing clarinet most of my life, and was the first clarinetist in the Summer High School band and a member of the All City Band. So, I get there, and of course I wanted to take clarinet, and then also, I thought “Two instruments, hmm, that’s interesting, maybe I should study another instrument in addition to clarinet,” because I had played piano and I had studied private piano up until probably my senior year in high school, so I knew I could read well, and I had all this background playing church music. So, I could do that. So I could study another instrument.

Now, that summer, my junior year in high school, I went to a summer music camp at Lincoln University, at Jefferson City, Missouri. This is a traditional black school, and there was an opportunity for students who had career aspirations in music to come there and spend, I think, probably a couple of weeks at a summer music camp. So, I went there, and in the course of that period, they were introducing students to string instruments. So, I always loved the sound of the cello and I said, “I want to play the cello.” But, my last name being “W,” the two or three cellos they had were gone, somebody else had them, so, there was nothing left. So, I said, “Okay, I have to play the double bass.” I thought, “Oh, that’s good because maybe I can play the double bass, and then I can double instruments playing in the jazz groups. Because I could read and understood the harmonic structure, I could quickly learn how to play the bass. I took the bass for the two weeks, and I liked it. So, then when they posed the idea to learn how to study another instrument, I said, “Can I start a new instrument?” “Sure, it can be a new instrument as long as the teacher accepts you.” So, I said, “Okay, I want to take one hour of clarinet and one hour of double bass.” And nobody said I couldn’t do it, so I said okay.

So, it turned out, because this was a small Music Department, most of the private instructors were members of the St. Louis Symphony. The clarinet teacher was the principle clarinetist for the St. Louis Symphony, Earl Bates, who was a phenomenal clarinetist. I mean, I didn’t know, I was a kid just coming there, and studying with Mr. Bates? “Sure!” “It’s going to be the first clarinetist?” Oh! That’s an added bonus; I’d study with anybody.

Then, the bass player turned out to be Henry Lowe, the first double bass player in the St. Louis Symphony! Not only was he the first double bassist, but I was the first student of his, because there were not that many bass players. So, I come along and I say, I want to study with him and he comes out to teach me. So, I’m going, “Wow, this is really interesting,” and because I was his first student, I think he wanted to make a good impression on the institution as well. And I had never played the double bass—except two weeks at a summer music camp, learning very basic things.

So, Henry Lowe turned out to be a phenomenal teacher. He was very patient with me; he showed me the basic things from the basic beginning. I had to pay for lessons during the year, but during all the summers, he gave me free lessons—and I made rapid progress.
One of the reasons that I wanted to play double bass is because I wanted to play in the Music Departments’ small chamber orchestra. And the chamber orchestra consisted of—all of the principal players who were the principal teachers and who were from the St. Louis Symphony. The orchestra was conducted by Leigh Gerdine, who was the head of the music department, and [who was] well known in the city. So, I said, “I would really like to play in that orchestra.” I was a good clarinetist, but the first clarinetist was Earl Bates, who was the first clarinetist of the St. Louis Symphony. And the second clarinetist was a student of his whose name was Jim Quick, who had been a student of his from age seven; he probably started this kid. So, here’s the first clarinet player, and the second clarinet player, who was also extremely good, but certainly not as good as Earl Bates, and he’s the same class as I am. I said “I’ll never make the orchestra.” Because Jim Quick, I know—I mean I thought I was as flexible in terms of the sheer technical technique of playing the instrument, but in terms of tone quality—I had had some private instruction, but I had never had private instruction of that caliber. So my embouchure was okay, but it wasn’t as good as the control that Jim Quick had. So, I said, “I’ll never make the orchestra if those two are going to be there.” But, then, the double bass—usually [they] only had one double bass, they could use two—and then I thought, “Well, wait a minute, if I really work really hard on the double bass, maybe in three years, you know, I might be good enough to make it in the orchestra.” So, I was highly motivated, and Henry Lowe was highly motivated, so I began to develop faster. I mean, I continued to study clarinet all four years, but I really developed rapidly on the double bass.

I tried also to play double bass jazz, but I have a fetish about my hands being dirty, and whenever they got dirty, I’d have to wash them. If you are trying to develop a callous—the bridges were really high, and if you plucked your strings, you know, you had to get real hard calluses—and I couldn’t do that because I would wash my hands. I’d wrap it up with tape, and they would break through, and I would be playing and it would be a bloody mess, and you’d get blisters. The way it worked is that you would get blistered, and then you would let the blister turn hard, and then you would play, and eventually you would get calluses on your fingers so it would allow you to play that. These are those big, the bridges were very high, and it was really hard to play that. So, to make a long story short, I never became a jazz bass player. I continued to play piano and the heck with the—.

Crawford: Did you get into the orchestra?

Wilson: I really worked hard and by my junior year, I was in the orchestra. I played beside my teacher. Now, that was really great because you learn certain things in lessons, but when you are playing in context with the best bass player in town, and you see what he does, and how he takes which bowing and why. So, for the next two years, I really learned—and it was about my second semester junior year, so I had a year and a half standing right next to him, playing and learning it. So, I developed very rapidly, and I had reached my goal, I was in the chamber orchestra.
Crawford: Who was conducting then?

Wilson: Leigh Gerdine, who was the head of the music department.

Crawford: Oh, he was the conductor?

Wilson: He was the head of the music department, and he was the conductor of the symphony. Okay, so then, by the end of my junior year, my senior year, I am playing well enough that I feel, okay, I can step out and play professionally. So, there was another semi-pro orchestra in town, called the St. Louis Philharmonic. So, they had auditions, I went and played in that. I went and played and I passed the auditions, and so that was the real test. Because I thought, “Well maybe it was my teacher, he was just giving me a chance,” but I went and played and I got in that orchestra. So, I said, “Okay.” Then I said, “I can handle myself.” So, I was playing the double bass in the St. Louis Philharmonic. It was not like the St. Louis Symphony; it’s more like, I guess today you would say something like the Berkeley Symphony, you know, professional but not—in the class of the San Francisco Symphony.

Crawford: Not the stature of—

Wilson: —but not the stature of the big one. But, I did that, and that gave me an opportunity to play in that orchestra.

So, what I was doing then, is I was playing in the orchestra, St. Louis Philharmonic; I was still gigging, playing rhythm and blues and jazz occasionally, when we could; I was also playing for the church—I think I may have stopped somewhere in the college years, but certainly the first two years and maybe the third I was still playing for the church. I remember there were Sunday evenings when I would go and play for the night services. Usually, there weren’t that many people there and it was primarily for people who worked on Sunday, and would come Sunday night. So, the church would be over, let’s say it started at seven thirty and was over by nine or nine thirty. So, sometimes I used to leave there and go down to the blues clubs, and a couple of times, play some gigs down in the blues clubs on Sunday night. So, all of that was going on at the same time, involving college life and all that other stuff that goes on like that. So, it was really an interesting experience.

Crawford: Did you get a pretty broad education?

Wilson: Very broad, it was a department of music within a liberal arts college, so that we had to have a broad liberal arts education, and take a wide range of courses within the department, and outside of the department. I mean, English, and the whole range of social sciences, in those days, they even required that you had to take physics and chemistry. I remember taking physics, and then I remember taking Botany. And, then, of course, the English and the History and a wide range of subjects. Music was considered like a major, like if you were a liberal arts major,
but with a concentration in English, or liberal arts major with a concentration in history, liberal arts major with a concentration in music. It was like that. But, then in addition to that, we had to do the performance courses, which, often were only like two units or one unit, the same thing that musicians always have to do, so we were taking a wide range of things.

My experience at Washington University was a very satisfactory one. Although I did have a couple of experiences that I was convinced were an example of out and out racism. I remember in the college English course, the first semester I did well, I probably had a B+ or something like that. It wasn’t an A, but it was a B, B+ and that was fine. That was when a C meant a C. [chuckles] Then, in the second semester of freshman English, I remember a teacher, who was a new teacher, who asked us one day to write an essay about something that happened to you in your home experiences, something that really spoke to you about your own unique perspectives. So, I said okay, so I wrote about my community and so forth. In the course of it, if you read it, you would say this person is obviously black because I talked about getting on the street car—I used to get on the street car and I would ride out to Washington University on the street car; it took a long time in the transportation—and then I talked about the neighborhood and some of the things, you know, just a honest kind of statement about the neighborhood.

Well, later on that day—up to that time, I had never made below a B in English. I had never had any difficulty expressing myself either verbally or in writing. But, after that day, the teacher said, “Who is Olly Wilson?” So, I raised my hand, and so she said, “Okay.” I wondered why she wanted to know who I was, I thought, well maybe she is just trying to identify people because when you are a new teacher, you want to know who everyone is. But, after that day, I never got a grade higher than a C+, never, and I worked and worked, and I said, “No, something’s wrong, something’s wrong.” because I could see what I had done before and I could see what other classmates did. I believe in this teacher’s mind, African Americans were not supposed to be able to write, so that, after that, my grades just dropped, at least in that course.

Crawford: Did you ever ask her about that?

Wilson: No, in those days you would never ask, because to ask her, at that time, would be—I mean, I assumed all she would say is “Well you didn’t qualify for it, you did this, you did that, you did that.”

Crawford: She could justify it.

Wilson: She could justify it in some way because it’s all relative and so forth. But I am convinced that that was an example of racism. After that, when I went to other teachers, I never had that problem. So it was isolated with this one teacher and that one class situation.
There were other situations of racism existing at the university. We started a, we became a charter group of a black fraternity, the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity. One of the reasons why we did it was because we were all close friends anyway—but there was the Inter Fraternity Sports program, and there was the Inter-Fraternity Sing and so forth. We sang in our group, and we also would play a little football here and there, touch football or whatever, and we thought, “Oh, we can play as well as these guys, so we are going to do it.” So, we started this football team. Now, what happened was that, in our fraternity, a number of the members of this fraternity didn’t go to day school, but they went to night school because they had to work in the day and this university also had a night school. Or they were in day school one semester and then they had to get out, and they were in night school. So, it was taking longer because by those standards, by the standards of the time, this was a very expensive university. I mean, when I think back about what I cost, it’s a joke. It was three hundred and twenty-five dollars a semester. That was top dollar, at that time. I had a half tuition scholarship, so I would get one half of that automatically for the four years, and then, because I gigged and because my parents gave as much money as they could, and then also, sometimes people in the community, the different fraternal groups would give you twenty five dollars or fifty dollars or whatever, I was always able to make it. I didn’t have a lot of extra money, but I always had enough to make it. Also, I worked at some of the downtown department stores as a dishwasher or porter, especially part time. So, I did that to earn spending money and book money. So, by putting all that together, I was able to make it through.

But getting back to the inter-fraternal group. The fraternities there ran the gamut from a lot of the traditional fraternities that you find. But in those days, there were a couple of fraternities that were clearly southern fraternities. They were organized in the south, and they, on certain days, their founder’s day, they would dress up in Confederate uniforms and ride around on horses. It was a very beautiful campus, and they would do this in these confederate uniforms. We found that deeply offensive. But not only that, they had a big fancy fraternity house. It was in fraternity row, just as you would think, and on campus, house after house after house after house after house. Well, obviously, we didn’t have a house.

But because it was a very wealthy school, there were very fancy houses. In front of this house, this fraternity, Kappa Alpha, I think it was called. I’ve forgotten. I mean I have got a book on it, and it’s there, you know, that confederate stuff. They would paint in front of their house; they would put a white line and they would call it the Mason-Dixon Line. To get to this house, you have to walk through the Mason-Dixon Line. So, we were offended by that. So, at night—we didn’t even live on campus—but we made a special effort to go out several times, get some black paint, and go and paint over that line with black paint. When we played football, you know, if we ever got to play those guys, I mean, we weren’t that big, but we learned little tricks from playing, you know, how to cut somebody really low, and so forth, so we made them pay for it. [laughs]
But that was an interesting experience. Most of the people were fair, straightforward. As a matter of fact, the university was in University City. University City is a predominantly Jewish area, about I would say anywhere from about one third of the students to maybe forty percent of the students were probably of Jewish background. And there were Jewish fraternities, too. So, as a result, you know, this overt racism which we might have experienced at that time or was transmitted to us was muted. I mean, you still had this fraternity that had the confederate unions, and they still had a carnival called “Thirteen.” And, in the carnival, we never participated in the carnival because one of the groups used to always do this minstrelsy stuff. They would paint their faces black and with big lips and you know, it was rah rah rah time. I remember those kinds of things.

Crawford: How did you organize? How did your group—?

Wilson: How did we organize? Well, most of us had gone to the same high school, so we knew each other. We would ride the streetcars back and forth, and we knew each other, so we just said, “Let’s form a fraternity.” So, somebody knew somebody, their father or somebody who had been in this fraternity, who called the graduate chapter of that fraternity, or maybe somebody—I think it may have happened the other way. Somebody in the graduate chapter knew that there were a small number of African Americans going to Washington University, which was an elite university at that time. I think they may have contacted somebody in our group, and said, “Look, are you guys interested in becoming a chartered chapter in this fraternity?”

Crawford: I see, so it was a national organization.

Wilson: Yes, a national organization.

Crawford: What name?

Wilson: Alpha Phi Alpha.

Wilmot: Do you remember what your pledging process was like?

Wilson: Yeah, it was, yeah, they put us through our paces, but since we were actually made or initiated by the graduate chapter, they were—I mean, in those days they paddled you and they paddled us, but it wasn’t as bad as it could have been.

Now, this was my sophomore year, but my freshman year I did one of the most stupid things I have ever done in my life. Because by then I felt, oh, I can do well academically, this is fine, I am going to do well, I was playing, I was doing well. And a lot of the buddies that I knew from high school went to the then Teacher’s College because this was the path for blacks going to higher education. You graduated from high school, and those who went to college went to the local black Teachers College, Harriet [Beecher] Stowe Teachers College, which had been around for many years. There, there were active fraternities, chapters of national
black fraternities: Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, Omega Psi Phi and Phi Beta Sigma. There was always a fraternity sing, and so my freshman year, I and several people I knew, went to this Pan Hellenic fraternity sing, where the sororities stood up and sang and then the fraternities stood up and sang. The Alpha’s sang and the Omega’s sang, and the Kappa’s and the Phi Beta’s sang. Well, the Kappa’s happened to have a particularly good group of singers, you know, and this was—.

In that time, since there were three universities in town. There was the one where the majority of blacks went was this Harriet Stowe Teachers College. There then was Washington University in St. Louis. Now, Washington University, there was only maybe, in the spring of 1954, just a handful, and then when I went there in 1955, there was still a small group of people. Then, there was St. Louis University, which also was predominantly white, it was a Catholic University, and there were just a handful of blacks going there too. There were a few people who went to Lincoln University in Missouri, who didn’t live in St. Louis, but they would go and maybe take a semester off and they would be back in St. Louis. Or, there was another college, it was an Engineering school that was over in Illinois. I forget the name of it. So, there may have been one or two people over there who lived in St. Louis. But most of the students went to Harriet Stowe Teachers College. These are the people who were singing in these choirs. Now, in addition to that, there are all these other people who either had finished college, or had gone to college and dropped out, but they were in a fraternity. So, they also were participating in this stuff. And you didn’t know, I mean, you are a freshman and you go there and people are singing and you know.

The Kappas had a particularly good singing group, so all of my buddies from high school, most of whom were going to Harriet Stowe for that time, said, “We are going to go,” and you know, “We like the Kappas, let’s join the Kappas.” And, they had these little smokers and you went there and you met people, and it was a citywide thing. So, we decided, a bunch of us said, “Let’s all pledge Kappa.” So, I pledged Kappa. This was second semester, freshman year. Biggest mistake I ever made in my life.

I mean, it was crazy because as it turned out, the people who sang—and some of those were interesting people—but most of those people were not really active in the chapter. There were one or two guys who were even in college. Most of the guys were not in college anymore, they had gone to Lincoln University in Missouri or somewhere. Some people may have gone to, well not Morehouse or Fisk, but may have gone to Howard or places like that. They didn’t graduate, but they were living in St. Louis. But they were a member of the fraternity and anybody who was a member of the fraternity can, you know, initiate new members. They were working at the post office, or whatever. So, a group started up with about fifteen or twenty pledges. And they had us doing all kinds of crazy things like you had to keep a little cigar box, which had candy to give to the senior members. They could call you up in the middle of the night—once you got on the actual process of “going through,” they would call you up in the middle of
the night and you would have to meet them out somewhere and bring them a
snack or something, and then they would drop you off somewhere and they would
leave you and you had to walk back. I mean, it was really crazy stuff. Plus, they
were paddling us, you know, and that wasn’t supposed to happen, so it was kind
of crazy. So, more people dropped out. But I am the kind of person who once I
commit to something, you know, I just commit to it. The people I liked, the other
buddies had long since dropped out, and then there were two other guys who had
this kind of determination. We had paid money, so we were going to be
initiated—so we were going through what’s called, “Hell Week.” This was really
ridiculous, I mean calling you early in the morning, late at night, so your school
works just going zoom [makes a motion downward].

Finally, right before—this was like the last weeks of being initiated in this
fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi. I discovered that all that singing was done by hangers
on, but that’s over, and they’re gone. They didn’t go through with it. So, there’s
two other guys remaining. One of the other guys with them was a guy who was at
Washington University, too. He was studying Engineering. The other guy was at
Harriet Stowe Teachers College, so there are only three of us. So, I decided this is
crazy, I don’t even like these guys, you know, why am I doing this? I don’t even
want to be their brother; I don’t want to be their friend, and by then it was
screwing up my academic record; it’s terrible; my parents think I am crazy. So,
the day before we were supposed to go through the final thing, we all decided we
were going to quit. So, we quit. Because the people doing it were people I didn’t
respect anyway. So, we quit, and then the national office got involved, “What is
this, you paid your money, they aren’t supposed to be paddling anymore.” It
wasn’t the paddling, it was just the harassment, and it was like, there were just
people who just were having a good time harassing people, that’s what it was
about. So, we quit. The national office came out and said, “Well, no, you’ve had
enough, you can go through it if you want to.” I said, “No, I don’t want to. I don’t
want to be brothers with these people.” So, that was it. I said, “You can keep the
money or give me back what I paid,” and it was a sacrifice to get that money
anyway. But, they gave me the money back, and they were very apologetic and
they said you could go. Well, out of group, one of them did accept it and did
decome a Kappa. The other two of us said no, we didn’t want to. I thought that
was the end of fraternities.

Then, the very next year this graduate chapter comes around with Alpha and says
you want to join the fraternity? I said, “No, I have had enough fraternity,” because
my grades had dipped, you know; I was really deeply concerned then. But these
were older established people who were respected people in the community. They
were physicians, professors, and lawyers, you know, solid citizens of the
community, and they said, “Look, now it is a totally different situation, those
were silly kids you were dealing with before, we are talking about solid people.”
So, although I was a little skeptical, I did decide to go through with Alphas. We
had some harassment, but nothing like what the Kappas did, and so that’s how I
became an Alpha.
Wilmot: Each of these fraternities have different traditions, and I am wondering what was it about the Alphas? You have spoken about how they occupied a more solid position, and respectable position, and also different traditions of services as well. I am just wondering what was it about the Alphas that appealed to you? And my last question about the Alphas is what has it meant to you over the years?

Wilson: Right. The Alphas, as I discovered later on, the Alphas was really the first African American fraternity for college men, people who were in college. It’s been the fraternity that focuses on scholarship more and service more, and so forth. It is the fraternity that claims people like W.E.B. DuBois and Martin Luther King, Roy Wilkins, and down the line. So, that was the group that I felt, I had more of an affinity with. The Kappas also have had outstanding people in the Kappas, and they also focus on that, but it is traditionally known for having a good time. Alphas have a good time too, but the Kappas really have a real party time. The Omegas also have a party time. But they are all solid people and the best, as I have met people over the years who are Alphas, there are more people whose values I share than my friends who are in Kappa and Omega.

Fraternity, for me, was very important in college. It grounded us in terms of social life, by having outlets, parties and so forth, and then service activities we did. So, that was very, very important in that time, in terms of having something, a group of people that you trust, you could deal with, and who are mutually supportive. I was very active in the fraternity. As a matter of fact, I was President of the fraternity for at least two years. So I was the person putting stuff together because I have always been the kind of person who likes the camaraderie of groups and organizations. It was very exciting, once I had a good social life, as a result of that.

After I graduated from college, I really wasn’t that active in the Alphas. A couple of times, I have gone to, you know, a special event here and there, and I still consider myself an Alpha, but I haven’t been really active in graduate chapters. Partially because I have been busy doing other things, and just not there. And, then, later on, I became a member of the Boulé, Sigma Psi Phi, which is a different kind of organization, and that sort of took the place of Alpha. I still consider myself an Alpha; but I am not an active participant, haven’t been for many years. It was mainly a college activity for me.

Wilmot: Were there any sororities on campus?

Wilson: There were sororities; there were no traditionally black sororities on campus. All the black sororities were, again, at this Harriet Stowe Teachers College. So, we had AKA’s and Delta’s and, let’s see, Zeta. So they were all active, and matter of fact, we had social events; Alphas and AKA’s were sort of brother, sister, fraternity, sororities. So, many times we would have an event for those two, or with the others too. I mean, you know, it was just a good time, good social outlet.
So, that’s a lot of my college years and so forth, at least the social part of it. The music part of it is interesting. I should mention that we took—music theory is usually the place from which one gets involved in composition. So, I remember taking music theory course, and doing well in it. Usually, the idea is to write in the style of an earlier period. Starting with Bach chorales, write in that style, and then writing little piano pieces and then piano sonatas, and then maybe graduate to a small, formed piece, and then write for chamber ensembles and orchestra. The teacher of music theory usually is a composer. My teacher, at Washington University, was a man whose name was Robert Wykes. Wykes was relatively new teaching there; he had finished his Ph.D. at the University of Illinois. I came in, and the classes were small—let’s say ten, twelve people, so you got a lot of individual attention. I enjoyed doing it. So by the end of my sophomore year, what one traditionally is asked to do is to begin to write music in a more contemporary style. So, following the models, we wrote that, and then there were places where you would be able to write in sort of a free style.

So, I began to write then, and Wykes came to me on a couple of occasions and said, “Oh, this is really good, you know. Have you ever thought about composition?” I thought, “In a way, well, you know, I really enjoy doing this,” but I didn’t have the foggiest idea, you know, as a nineteen year old college student—this is the end of my sophomore year—what a composer does; you know, a real breathing composer and what do you do, and how do you get to do it?

Wilmot: Yes, how would you support yourself in this life?

Wilson: Yeah, “What do you do?” He said, “Well, you know, often the patron for the composer is usually the University. You become a university professor,” like him. So, he became the model of a person who wrote music, who taught, and was interested in ideas. All of which fascinated me. And then I began to think, “You know, actually I have been writing music all the time,” because of my little bands, even back in high school. I would sort of write tunes in the style of whatever we were doing, an original, and try to write it for whatever instruments we had, and we would do it. Sometimes we would play them and some were better than others, but this impulse of writing things was there all the time, you know, in the different kinds of styles. And so it was natural, I felt it was natural to do it that way. Then, he said “You know, if you are really interested, you should maybe take a course in composition.” This was a course that was essentially two or three people, and it was private instruction. I did that for a semester, and then he said, “Well, you know, if you want to study privately with me, then you can do that.” So, I did that. This was during my junior year, when I really began to—I said “This is really what I want to do. I want to be a composer. I want to write music.”

Wilmot: You didn’t want to be a bandleader?
Wilson: No, I didn’t want to be a bandleader anymore. I wanted to be a composer. And I had seen a pathway which directed that way, and that meant teaching at a university which I also enjoyed.

Wilmot: That is such a huge shift. It is like a whole different horizon.

Wilson: But, I had two years of preparing for that because I was there, and there would be composers coming through, and they would talk about their music and I would go and I would listen to that. And then, I was listening to everything I could, and being fascinated by what I was listening to, and reading scores and trying to understand that, and figuring out how people did things. So, all of that, by the time I was a junior, I figured, “Okay, this is really what I want to do.” I was taking chances at doing that. I still didn’t know if I was really any good. You know, I didn’t know if the teacher was just encouraging me.

Crawford: What was his music like? Did you like his music?

Wilson: I liked his music very much. I went to performances of his music. I thought, “Oh, this is great.” Then, because it was contemporary music, and they were doing things differently then, you know, the eighteenth, nineteenth century. I was listening and understanding what these new ideas were like. Then, in composition, what really convinced me was that, in my senior year, I had written—my first piece was a piece called “Prelude in Line Study,” and it was like a “Prelude and Fugue” I mean, that was sort of the inclination. Actually, it was a prelude and a canon.

Crawford: Was that your opus one, or do you consider “Quartet” your opus one?

Wilson: That was opus one. Although, I guess, I had written other things before, but they were usually in the popular realm or something. But this was the first piece I called a piece. I don’t think I called it “opus one” because you never call opus one, opus one until later on. So, it was called “Prelude in Line Study.” It was for a flute, clarinet, bassoon, and there was a fourth instrument, I think, maybe bass clarinet. Maybe that’s what it was, flute clarinet, bassoon, and bass clarinet. All wind instruments. I worked and worked on that piece, and I finally got the piece played. And it was pretty much like I thought it was. I was particularly pleased with the counterpoint writing and that kind of thing. So, I was very pleased by that piece. Then, I was encouraged to write a second piece. The second piece was a trio for piano, flute and cello. That piece, what did I call it? I think I called it “Trio.” That piece, I really got energized by that piece.

Crawford: You said “that was more than an exercise.”

Wilson: That was more than an exercise. The first piece was really more sort of like an exercise, but this, I really felt that this piece was good. That was the senior year. Now, that year, in the Midwest, there was a Composer Symposium that existed that was a consortium between many of the schools in the Big Ten: University of
Illinois, University of Michigan, University of Iowa, Indiana University, and Northwestern University, those four, all of whom had large schools of music. Wykes was a graduate of the University of Illinois, and had participated during his days; he did his Ph.D. at the University of Illinois. That particular year, Northwestern, at that time, had difficulty in getting a program together. The format of this symposium was as follows: each school would give a concert, consisting of pieces done by students there, graduates primarily, but graduates or undergraduates, and they would perform, and they would also bring their performers. They would come, and they would present a concert. So, there would be at least four concerts in the three days. It started Friday, Saturday, and then on Sunday there would be a grand concert. The grand concert consisted of pieces that were selected by a jury. The jury consisted of faculty from each of the institutions, plus the guest composer. They would always bring a guest composer who had some reputation, and they would have the principal faculty, at least one faculty from each of the other schools. They heard all four programs, and they would choose one piece from each school.

The piece I had brought was this “Trio,” and the flautist I had, I think Karen Rosenblum was her name. She was an excellent flautist, and so there the cellist and the pianist. So, they had performed the piece at Washington University; I was very pleased; and then this piece was performed at the Symposium, this time it was the University of Iowa. It was a great opportunity to hear music of other people your age. Most of the people were older than me because I still was a senior. Most of the people were graduate students. So, they played the pieces, and the guest composer was Wallingford Reiger, an eminent American composer at that time, and one of the early Americans to use a serial technique. So, at the end of the concert, then there was a discussion, and the faculty would sort of indicate what they thought were good things and not so good things, things that worked well and so forth. So, that was fine, and when my piece was played, I got very good comments from all of the faculty, including Wallingford Reiger! And that was like really great for me.

Crawford: It was not serial music?

Wilson: No, it wasn’t serial, but “Prelude in Line Study” was somewhat serial. This piece was not serial. Informed by serial technique, but it wasn’t really serial.

Crawford: Was it considered, not only appropriate, but kind of mandatory to use twelve tone?

Wilson: Well, it wasn’t mandatory. It was just, at that time, a really sort of challenging technique. People were discovering Schoenberg and [Anton] [Webern?].

Crawford: Were you getting something from Princeton, hearing [Milton] Babbitt?

Wilson: Princeton, Babbitt had come through, and we had heard Babbitt, but probably the dominant force in 1959 in American composition, if there was a European force,
probably was [Paul] Hindemith. You know, Paul Hindemith, who was teaching at Yale then, and hailed forth. So, twelve tone technique and style was important idea, and Webern was just something whispered because none of his stuff was really recorded then, or not readily available. And Schoenberg, you knew more about Schoenberg than you actually knew about his music because very little of it was recorded. So, the idea of this new way of thinking about things was a very potent force in terms of thinking about contemporary music.

So, at any rate, my piece was informed by a serial technique, but not really serial. It was, but it was energetic; it was honest; it was straightforward, and I think probably reasonably fresh and so forth. But, it still was modeled on probably the music of [Bela] Bartok and Hindemith and so forth.

Crawford: You said Bartok was—

Wilson: Yeah, Bartok and Hindemith were influences, strong influences, on my and everybody else, and certainly so was Stravinsky, you know. So, to make a long story short, my piece was chosen from my school to be performed on the Sunday program. So, from each school they chose one piece and then made a master concert of that. My flute player had to go back to St. Louis, so I needed a flute player, and I was concerned, “What was I going to do?” But, there was a young flute player there, whose name was—gosh I forget his name. I remember that he conducted with the—he is in San Diego now; we hired him; he was one of the candidates for the position. He really didn’t—

Crawford: In the search committee?

Wilson: Yeah, in the search committee.

Crawford: Where is he from?

Wilson: San Diego.

Crawford: Yeah, I know who you mean but I can’t—

Wilson: I will think of it later. It is embarrassing that I can’t remember his name. It will come back. Anyway, he was a student there. He was a senior. He was a phenomenal player, and he was just beginning—he was going to leave there, and the next year he went to Columbia, and he and Charles Wuorinen and Joel Krosnick formed the Group for Contemporary Music, and was one of the first university groups to specialize in the performance of contemporary music. I will think of his name in a minute, but he—very powerful player and very energetic and so forth. So, he was the player who was asked to play my piece, and he played my piece and gave it a tremendous performance, and you know, I was very pleased.

Crawford: You don’t mean Harvey Sollberger?
Wilson: Yes, Harvey Sollberger. He was just beginning because he’s about the same age as I am. So, that was my first foray into the larger world of contemporary music. I was pleased with that, and then, since there were outside people who said, “You have some talent. This sounds good,” that even made me more convinced to really focus my career toward that. Then, I had applied to the University of Illinois for graduate school because my teacher had gone to the University of Illinois, and had good things to say about it; Illinois was close to Missouri; it seemed the logical thing to do. So, I applied and then I was accepted to graduate school, so that was the beginning of my professional career.

Crawford: Did you think of yourself, at that point, as an eclectic composer? You were going to take from [John] Cage maybe or whatever?

Wilson: I probably didn’t think too much about it. I thought one thing that was always very clear to me in composition, and that was, this is such a unique kind of enterprise that you must have your own personal artistic integrity. What that meant for me was that something that you are convinced by, independent of what is going on around you. Be very cognizant of everything; it is important to know everything that is going on around you, to be inspired by and stimulated by, and fascinated by whatever is going on. But, in order to be meaningful, it has to reflect your innermost desires and your innermost aspirations and your innermost feelings and sentiments and ideas in order to meaningful, and that might be, by its very nature, eclectic. So, that wasn’t a problem. The main thing that was important is that it reflected you honestly, and that was the thing that drove it. So, the idea of listening to this and listening to that and listening to everything was great, but never the idea of emulating whatever was the hottest thing right then, that never appealed to me. Fascinated by it, but didn’t—

Crawford: You certainly didn’t stick with serialism.

Wilson: No, no. But I did—

Crawford: Were you bothered with the lack of—because there was this academic music conflict, and was it communicating—?

Wilson: That really didn’t bother me. I always have some difficulty with the term “academic music,” and the reason for that is that once you begin to write music that reflects your ideas and values, and also it does reflect your experiences too, in terms of the kind of music you have heard—often, for the lack of another word, it is either popular or academic. I mean, popular you know what the dynamic is: [smacks table to punctuate] how many people like the music and how many people are going to like it and how many people are going to pay for it. That’s pure and simple. But, often, music that I have found most interesting was not popular, whether it was jazz, or whether it was music for a string quartet or an orchestra or a solo voice. It was music that had something that communicated with me. Sometimes, because it was not popular, in some people’s minds it was academic.
Now, I also know that sometimes people use the term academic to refer to music that seems to following whatever is occurring in the academic world at that point, and academic in the sense that this something that you produce in academies, but the fact of the matter is that the academies were just beginning to get established when I came along. Because if you look back at the thirties, the idea of academic music didn’t make much sense because not many people were teaching in the universities. It is in the fifties when you get the shift toward, the shift in degrees. When people began to demand degrees, terminal degrees in the fifties for anything. So, that you had the creation of doctoral programs in music theory and music composition. Before that time, it was, you know, a master’s degree in whatever, and so as long as you did that, showing that you—and what it shows more than anything else is that you have perseverance, you could maintain that. But, then there is a certain amount of, not only perseverance and discipline, but also knowledge base that you have if you spend that much time in any field, and so you are focusing on that. So, people began to use that as a basis of the selection process for working in higher education.

So that, it was during in my generation where one began to have to have a Ph.D.; [DMA?] or some kind of doctorate degree to be considered a serious candidate. Sometimes, because it was new, sometimes the programs were extraordinarily rigorous because people didn’t know what it meant. Other times it was—well, it usually erred on the point of being overly rigorous, you know, trying to decide if this person is a scholar, is this person a performer, is this person a composer and so forth. But, enough places figured out a reasonable mean, and after a while, the graduates began to demonstrate understanding of certain things. So it’s interesting.

Crawford: You were aware of all of the various developments, you were exposed to, in other words, to everything that was going on. It was an exciting time because there were no horizons, I mean, pure chance music if you wanted to.

Wilson: Sure, well, what happens is that most of the exponents of, let’s say, pure jazz—I mean, in the first place, it was actually, I think, as I look back on it, a positive to be in the Midwest as opposed to being on the East coast or the West coast because in the Midwest, we had some good teachers and some excellent musicians, like Robert Wykes, or later on at the University of Illinois, there were a few people like Burrill Philips, you know, Robert Kelly, Gordon Beeker, other people who had a certain amount of caché, certainly in the Midwest. But, these are not people who were constantly being performed in New York because not much contemporary music was being performed in New York anyway. So, none of the major orchestras rarely did a piece of any of the contemporary composers, not even Schoenberg. Stravinsky yes, [Aaron] Copland yes, but outside of that, few and far between. [Leonard] Bernstein, a little bit later on. So, that as a result, you had composers whose major work was performed there, at that institution, and maybe you didn’t have a national reputation. But because the composers from the East were from the East, and because you had people with interesting personalities and interesting aesthetic concepts like Milton Babbitt, coming from
the East, and then all of the people who were influenced by Milton Babbitt, at that
time, sort of a coming out of the so called Columbia/Princeton School. Then, you
had, on the West Coast, though there were a lot of other things going on the West
Coast, what you would hear a lot about was [John] Cage. So, the Cage idea, the
sort of influence from the East and the whole notion of indeterminacy and so
forth. But, in the Midwest, these people would come through, and you would sit at
their feet and listen to what they had to say, and then you would have somebody
coming from the East Coast, so you had an introduction to both developments.

Crawford: So, you got more!

Wilson: But, nobody there was saying you have to choose this or you have to choose that.
So, there was not this mandate.

Crawford: Much less cloning.

Wilson: Yes, much less cloning. There were no great gurus. There were people you
respected as teachers, but there weren’t great gurus, you know, people that you
felt you had to be a disciple of. You had to study with X and not with Y because
you going to be doing that. Even Hindemith, back at Yale, had sort of began to, as
the Europeans tend to do, and still do, sort of think, “Well, this is the way. If you
want to study composition with me, then you do what I do,” and become a little
Hindemith.

Crawford: You always read that about [Roger] Sessions.

Wilson: Sessions had that to a certain extent, although Sessions also disavowed that, too. I
guess it depends on the level of your skill. I guess, (a teacher might say) at some
stages, “If you are a beginning composer, you need to do this. You need to work
on this. You need to have these skills.” Now, we had that in the Midwest too. You
need to work on skills. You need to make sure you can do this. You need to
understand the value of counterpoint. You need to understand the value of
shaping forces over a long period of time, but there were no mandates. From the
teacher’s perspective, the idea was to try to figure out what the student want to do,
and then to try to help, to assist him or her in accomplishing that. So, it was a
different set of priorities that you had then. I think that allows you to grow,
unfettered by imposed aesthetics. So, that was part of it that helped.

Crawford: So, how’s our time? We’re getting where we want to go. How are you? Are you
okay?

Wilson: Okay, I am fine.

Crawford: Then, maybe talk about the doctoral process. You got a doctor’s degree in a very
short time, a work that was kind of a breakthrough for you.
Wilson: Right. Well, first, I completed a master’s degree from University of Illinois. At first, I couldn’t get a job anywhere.

Crawford: That’s right. You went to Florida, didn’t you?

Wilmot: What was that like, the process of looking for work?

Wilson: Ah, tough, tough. What happened is that—again this is another place where racism really impacted on us. Because, at the time, whenever you had to apply for a job people required photographs, pictures. So, you would have your application, and right on the front of your application is your photograph. Well, in those days, there were not career developments, career placement agencies on campuses. You just looked in the Encyclopedia and found the names of schools and where they were, and you would just type out thousands of letters. I couldn’t type so Elouise typed out thousands of letters. Some of them, you still could write letters of application by hand, so I wrote letters of application by hand and so forth. This is 1960 now. So, we are writing and writing and sent letters all over the place. There were no job places. You would say “Dear Sir, I am interested in this position, blah, blah, blah, I have completed my degree, and blah, blah, blah.” Usually, from most I didn’t hear anything, but then you would get some letter that said “Thank you, but we don’t have a position for you.” Others would say “Thank you. We have a position. We will let you know if we are interested.” From most of them you just didn’t hear anything.

But there were many jobs because this was still part of the expansion of higher education at that time. Most of the people who graduated with me, with their master’s, eventually heard from somebody and got a job. Now, I finished the degree in August, but I had been writing since about February something, and I didn’t hear anything. And I was writing all over, you know, just looking in the Encyclopedia writing every place I had ever heard of, independent of where it is because I am getting desperate now. Because the only alternative would have been, if I did not finish my degree, then the only thing I could do was to teach in the public schools. At that time, that meant band director position, and I knew that I didn’t want to be a band director. Or go back and work at the post office, and I didn’t want to do that.

So, in August, I got a letter from Florida A & M University, which is a traditionally black university in Tallahassee, Florida, saying “We got your letter, and we have a position here. If you are interested, write back, and let us know that you are still interested.” Now, this is in August. I graduated in August, and I heard about this position and school started in the September, like in two weeks. So, I wrote them back and said, “Yes, I most definitely am interested in this position.” We had a little trepidation about going to Florida because it was the Deep South, you know, further south than Missouri. I said, “Well, you know, I don’t know,” but I wanted the job. So, to make a long story short, they said, “Yes, we do have a position for you, blah, blah, blah.” So, I did say okay. Then, I had to convince
Elouise to go [chuckles], and she said, “Okay.” So, then we began that sojourn, and that should be the subject of another discussion.

Crawford: Okay.

Wilson: Good, so that was the transition.

[End of Interview 2]
Interview 3: November 21, 2002

Crawford: This is interview number three, it is November 21\textsuperscript{st}. Olly Wilson in the Oral History Office, and Olly, we wanted to start with your year in Illinois where you got your master’s degree. It was 1961. And, maybe you can just hit the high points, talk about the electronic music studio.

Wilson: Okay, I went to the University of Illinois because of my relationship with Robert Wykes. I think I mentioned that before. He was a teacher; he was a professor at Washington University; and he had completed his PhD at the University of Illinois. He encouraged me to apply there, so I applied there as well as several other places and I was very pleased to learn that I was not only accepted, but awarded a scholarship—so that solved all the problems. But, it meant that I had to make some more money because when I graduated from college, I still had a few bills associated with school, but I graduated one week and got married the next week. So, now I am a husband. We wanted to live together because that’s what you are supposed to do when you are married. [laughs]

Elouise had finished her medical technology education and internship. So, she could apply for a job. So, she did apply for a job in at Champaign-Urbana, and she did get an appointment at a hospital as a clinical medical technologist. But, in order to get the position, she had to go a month before we had planned. She had to start working there in May, and I wasn’t scheduled to go to school until September. So, she came back long enough to get married—I think she came back for a week—long enough to get married and spend a little time together. Then, she had to go back to Champaign, Illinois to maintain the position. I, on the other hand, had a job in St. Louis. That was a job that had previously been a summer job, working in the Post Office. And, so in order to make the money that I needed, I worked in the Post Office that summer. So, even though we were married, she went back, she was living in Champaign, and I was living in St. Louis until the end of August. So, we were married and separated for the first three months.

Then I went to the University of Illinois. That was interesting because it meant that—it was a sacrifice that we had to make, but it was important for us to do that because I knew by then I wanted to be a composer. I knew that a composer would not be able to do much composing unless he really had a patron, and the patron was the university. It is something I recognized very early. And in order to be a viable candidate, you had to have a graduate degree, and probably a PhD. It was right at that time when academic requirements were changing. So, I said, “I’ve got to go to graduate school.” So, that was fine, and Elouise understood that, and was willing to go and to work and to be the principal breadwinner. So, that was really important. And, that’s what we did.
I worked in St. Louis during the summer, she lived in Champaign-Urbana. She would come down on weekends when she could; I would go up on weekends when I could, and so that’s the way we started our marriage. Then, when I moved to Urbana, at the end of August, I started my classes. It was an exciting experience because the University of Illinois, at that time, in the school of music, in addition to being a major large school of music, which meant there was a focus on performance as well as scholarship, which was different from the focus at Washington University. Washington University was a small department within the context of the liberal arts school. So, it focused on a broad liberal arts education. In retrospect, I am pleased for that, but it was not a conservatory atmosphere where performance was emphasized. We did perform, and we had performance requirements, but it wasn’t the kind of place where there were scores of people who played any instrument, and who were really very good, and everybody is vying to play their juries, and everybody is vying to get on stage. Everybody is looking forward—to a career as a performer.

Crawford: As Oberlin, you said that was the climate at Oberlin.

Wilson: That’s right, exactly. So, going to University of Illinois was an exciting experience because it was a much larger school. There were a lot of performers, excellent musicians of every stripe all over the place, so that was very exciting and encouraging to me. There, I came in contact with a wide range of composers because, in graduate school, you meet people who, like yourself, have been good students in undergraduate school, and everybody is really dedicated, talented and intelligent. So, it was my introduction to serious scholarship on the graduate level, as well as an introduction to serious study of the theoretical side of music. My undergraduate program was strong, and it had a lot of musicology, but this was at a higher level. And, that was very good for me.

It also was the introduction to the electronic music, and that was pivotal. Because in the country, at that time—we are talking 1960—there were only two places in the country, where electronic music was being pursued. One, was Columbia/Princeton. That was a combination of Columbia University and Princeton University.

Crawford: How was that a combination?

Wilson: Well, because the essential technology that was being used was the RCA synthesizer. That synthesizer was a gift to Princeton University, but it was housed in New York. So, it was a combination of Princeton and Columbia. Milton Babbitt was at Princeton, but he also was associated with Columbia. I think he lived most of the time in New York, or had easy access to come to New York. And that was a pivotal kind of development in the history of electronic music. That was one center. The other center was the University of Illinois.
The University of Illinois had an interesting history in this regard. Because there was a professor there, whose name was Lejaren Hiller, who was actually a professor in chemistry, but he had lifelong interest in music, and he also had a great interest in what was then called “artificial intelligence.” The approach was to try to see how music functions as a system. That is, what are the rules, how do they work? And, if you can figure out what the important aspects are, what the important rules are in any kind of intelligent system, then you should be able to duplicate it. So, part of the idea was having the, then, mainframe computer that was very famous at the time, known as the Iliac Computer. The Iliac Computer was then being programmed—Hiller was a principal researcher in a project—to see if you can get the Iliac Computer to duplicate the kinds of decisions that people make when they write music. Now, of course, it was a very ambitious project, and in retrospect, you know there are so many different decisions made that even with a computer, especially with the level of computation skills at that time, it was really a far too ambitious project. But, at any rate, it was a beginning.

Crawford: Was it exciting?

Wilson: Well, you know, it was interesting because you wondered, “How does this work?” and “To what degree can we really simulate a system that is reflected in the way music is created?” So, you try to feed in the rules. As you know from studying harmony, there are certain kinds of things you know. You can look at a particular system and you can say, “Yes, there are certain kinds of things that happen at the end of phrases, we call those cadences and there are different kinds of cadences. So, that every time we have one of these, that will say stop,” and there are certain kinds of things that happen. If you look at any musical system, certain notes are used more than others: the [tonic?], the [the dominant?], and so other notes are used in relationship to one another. The leading tone tends to go to the tonic, you know, and things like that. Those are very simple, basic things, but there are a wide range of other things that you need to utilize too. But, even having figured out those, and then programmed that in, then you ask the computer to generate a musical piece. So, that’s what they were doing. It was understood that this at the infancy of trying to understand music as a system, as a closed system, but it was fascinating and interesting. Then, people said, “Well, if we can program it, we then can ask the computer to program pieces for itself,” I mean, that was part of the idea. So that you have this automatic music written using the rules, the ideas, and the principles that are associated with composition as we understand them in a particular style. So, that was part of the idea.

Crawford: I remember reading that [Edgard] Varese said this early experimentation in electronics was like “two pure physicists” getting together, working together, and seeing in great excitement what they could do. Does that strike a chord?

Wilson: Yeah, Varese was very interested in that from a slightly different point of view. He was interested in it in the sense that he, as a composer, was
fascinated by science, and fascinated by what he thought was logical, and
ordered. Varese thought of music as an ordered system, an ordered sound
system. He looked at models in nature, like the crystal, for example, and
thought that by applying some of the kinds of structures that you find in
natural phenomena, especially as we understand them from scientific inquiries
into these systems, we might find ways of creating logical musical order. So,
he saw that as being an interesting thing. Then, because of that, he said, “If
there were machines that could duplicate these kinds of things and could help
us in achieving some of the kinds of things that we know are possible but are
difficult for human beings to do, then that would be great.” So, he was always
looking to the machine, you know. So, ultimately, by the end of his lifetime,
certainly there were machines that were available, and certainly pieces he did,
like “Deserts,” was a piece that enabled him to move into that area. But, the
difference between what Hiller was doing and what ultimately happened is,
Hiller was looking at computer as an analytical tool, you know, how it
analyzes things, and then duplicates them, not so much as a tool for the
composer to use. He was initially attempting to discover how a system works,
and then, how to and let’s duplicate it by using the skills of the computer.

Crawford: He was a scientist?

Wilson: Yeah, he was a scientist, but, as he got more involved in it, he became more
interested in it as an artist. Actually, he began to compose. He may have been
doing a little composing all the time. But since he came from the scientific
community, and since his first orientation was the stance of a scientist, he was
actually somewhat suspect in the context of the music student because he was
dealing with music, but he wasn’t a musician. And you and I know that in any
discipline, if somebody comes from another discipline that seems quite
removed from that, and they are doing this, people would say, “Well, you
know, he doesn’t have much credibility, he doesn’t really understand, hasn’t
paid his dues, he can’t play the piano,” you know, it was one of those kinds of
things.

But nevertheless, he did manage to get a room in one of the buildings across
the street—you know, in those Universities there were big halls, then they
were right in the proximity of homes, and often, people who lived that close to
the University, like they do at Berkeley, got tired of the students being there,
and they would sell their houses or donate them to the university. Before you
knew it, there would be an institute here, or studies here. This was one of the
buildings that was right across from the Music department that had become an
adjunct building to the music department. There was a room upstairs, and
Hiller had this little room, and that’s where he had some equipment—not the
Iliac Computer, because the Iliac Computer was a mainframe and that was
tied in with other things. You generated things for the Iliac—but he had other
oscillators and generators, sound producing mechanisms in that room. You
know, at that point, he was interested in “How do we begin to make music
using the electronic media?”
Crawford: Was that your basic involvement at Illinois?

Wilson: No, my basic involvement at Illinois was just as a graduate student in music composition. As a matter of fact, I finished my master’s degree, masters of music and composition, at the University of Illinois in the summer of 1960. And this was going on, but I really didn’t have any contact with it then. Nobody had any contact with it.

Crawford: That’s right, you came back to it.

Wilson: Yeah, I came back to it. The reason why you didn’t have contact with it was because there wasn’t much to have contact with. Because Hiller was doing his research and then he had this little room upstairs, and it said “Studio for Experimental Music.” Well, that was a fascinating title, and we were kind of interested in that, but there wasn’t any ongoing thing with the music department, at least in terms of instruction or graduate students. I think he had one or two assistants who were from the sciences, actually, and they happened to be there.

Now, what happened though, and this is the important key is—did I tell the story about—? I have told this story a lot of times about, well, let me tell you again, if I have—

Crawford: You will know if you told this story.

Wilson: What happened is that I was playing in the orchestra—I was a double bass player, because I had started playing double bass at Washington University. I told you the story about studying with my bass teacher. So, I had developed rapidly and by that time I was a pretty good bass player, so I was playing with an orchestra. One day, at the end of the orchestra rehearsal, Professor Hiller shows up, and then the orchestra conductor says, “Professor Hiller is here. He has a piece, an orchestra piece that was generated by the Iliac Computer—“and he wants to have a recording of that piece by the orchestra.”

Crawford: Oh, you did tell this story. I remember this story. That’s how you kind of established a relationship with him. You agreed to play his piece.

Wilson: Exactly. I was the only bass player who stayed. Most of the other students said, “Oh, we gotta do homework, we don’t want to do this.”

Crawford: Did you know that you wanted to get involved in electronic music? You were drawn?

Wilson: I was curious about that. There wasn’t too much electronic music around then. I mean, the first electronic music that becomes music that we think of as one of the predecessors of electronic music was about 1945, 1948. Pierre Schaeffer and Pierre Henri in France. They were doing what was called...
“Musique Concrète.” And basically what it meant was turning on tape recorders, recording loud sounds—hence “concrète” sounds, or concrete sounds—and then manipulating the sounds by speeding the tape recorder up, slowing it down, and using it in a number of different technical approaches. Then, pre-recording that against something else, and making a sound collage. So, that was the earliest music generated by electronic means. And really, essentially, it was tape-recorder manipulations of real sounds, not musical sounds.

Okay, so that’s about 1945, 1948. That continued, and then you had people beginning to develop, both in Europe and in the United States, other means of producing sounds. Most obvious ways were taking oscillators and generators, which were used for scientific measurement of one kind or another. If you take an oscillator and you have an oscillator at a certain frequency, and you combine that with other oscillators of other frequencies, you then can build a complex sound. The sound waves that were generally used were sine waves. These are pure sound waves. But if you add multiple sine waves at different frequencies, then you get more complex sounds, and by so doing, you are able to change the timbre of the sound. So, that process was known as “additive synthesis,” and that additive synthesis and filtering techniques were the major means of sound processing that were being used. Of course, used in the context of recording things and then modifying them by means manipulating tape recorders. That was pretty basic stuff, but it was a step. By the time we get to the time I am coming along. In 1960, this is still very rare, only one or two, or three places in the world doing this. So, it wasn’t like there were many electronic music compositions around.

Crawford: San Francisco Tape Center hadn’t quite gotten launched.

Wilson: Not by 1960. In the sixties, it did get started, but not in 1960. The idea of concrete music and the idea of doing this was in the air, and every now and then you would hear some things. There were a few studies in the earlier sixties coming from studios in Cologne, and then, of course, in Paris you had some important development. And then, by that time, the early and middle sixties, you had development, at Columbia University, when this synthesizer was given to Columbia University, and then Lejanim Hiller was generating computer music out in Illinois University. But, it was just an idea when I first heard about it, but then I graduate and go away.

Crawford: What was your thesis?

Wilson: My thesis was a composition. It was a piece for a large orchestra?

Crawford: Was that a voice and piano piece?

Wilson: I am trying to remember what that was.
Crawford: You were already writing for vocal music, weren’t you.

Wilson: Yes. I actually had a recital. I think it was a recital of several chamber pieces. I am sure there was a piece with voice; I think there was another piece, a chamber piece or something. There must have been three or four pieces. I probably have a program around here somewhere, but I haven’t seen it in thirty years.

Crawford: We will get it for the book. Let’s go on to Florida then.

Wilmot: I have one question. I am wondering how did you find, how did you come to work with Robert Kelley?

Wilson: Oh, Robert Kelley was a principal composer, teacher, at the University of Illinois. The way the process worked, once you go to school there, then I guess usually somebody is assigned to work with the new students, the first year students, and I think he was assigned to work with me. I think that was how that happened. I think the first year, certainly the first semester, you were assigned to work with a specific person, and that was Robert Kelley. Then, I subsequently kept working with him because it was a master’s degree and I think it was a year and a half or something because I kept going straight through. So, I worked with him.

But, at the University of Illinois and the University of Iowa, the terminal degree for most composers up to that time had usually been a master’s degree. But things were changing. Higher education was exploding all over the place. Schools were being developed, and California was the vanguard with the creation of the State University system. I think that happened sometime in the sixties, the Master Plan was something like that. So, all these California State Universities were developing, and California had this marvelous program where any citizen could go to college. There would be a college, on one level or another, within one hundred miles of anybody’s house. That’s including the three-tier system: University of California, the State system, and the community college district. Of course, the community college district was still developing, but the University was very well established and the state universities were being established. So, many people would move to California because you had many opportunities to study there.

This impacted on other places because this meant that there were more jobs, and therefore, there were more people going to graduate school because now it was a viable profession. You go to graduate school, you get a degree, and you apply for jobs because there was an explosion of institutions that offered graduate degrees and undergraduate degrees in music. So, this meant that institutions began to look inward at themselves and say—you know, in most of the fields by that time, the degree that you needed in order to teach was a PhD. Music and the arts, this was not the case. As a matter of fact, it is still not the case in art practice or in dance, but it certainly is the case in art history
and in musicology, it was becoming the case, and in composition, a lot of the leading universities in the country began to say, “We should require a doctoral degree,” and then institutions said, “We should offer a doctoral degree for people to do it.” There were two kinds of doctorate degrees: one was a PhD, and the other was [D.M.A.?].

So, when I finished the MM degree, was eligible to teach at a university, but jobs were few and far in between, and usually the programs were from one and a half to two years, and then you could do it. But when I finished in August of ’60, what happened was that we were applying for jobs and I wasn’t getting anything. Now, part of that had to do with the fact—well, it had nothing to do with the fact about the job market because there were a lot of jobs. It had everything to do with race. Because, at that time, you were required to send photographs with your letters of application. Actually, you know, there were no career development centers and that kind of stuff. You simply wrote letters to every place, and so you got out the encyclopedia, and you looked at all the places in North Dakota or wherever, I didn’t even know. I just said, “Well, it’s a job, and this is what I am going to do,” so I applied to everywhere. To no avail because there just wasn’t the practice of having people of African American descent teaching outside of a traditional African American university. So, I didn’t get any offers until August of that year, when I got a letter from Florida A&M, offering me a job, and that was, of course, a difficult decision because it was in the deep south, and it also was in the middle of the freedom rides and this other stuff that was going on. So it was a tough, tough decision.

Now, just to back up a few other things about Illinois—

Wilmot: So Elouise said, “Okay.”

Wilson: She said, “Okay.” Elouise again says, “Okay.” Good old Elouise. That’s why we are still married after forty years. She always would say—she was very supportive of me. So, it was okay. I mean, we thought about it. It wasn’t easy, and I thought about it too because of the—I mean, this isn’t too long after the Emmett Till murder. People were getting killed, lynched and all that kind of stuff. You associated that primarily with the Deep South, and this was the Deep South. So, we did think long and hard about that.

But, getting back to Illinois, just a couple of other things that happened there. In addition, to having Hiller there, and the fact that I played in that orchestra piece, several years later, matter a fact, seven years later, I write him and say, “Look, I am the guy who came and played the bass with you.” And by that time the center had developed, “and I would really like to get on the ground floor of this. Can I come and work there in the summer?” And he wrote back and said, “Yes.” So that was great. By that time I was teaching at Oberlin, but that was the connection with Illinois and that was the beginning of electronic music.
There were other things going on in Illinois at the time that were starting there, and that was, Illinois at the time, was a major place—it still is a major place for studying composition. In the early sixties, they began to have a festival of new music, and that festival began, I guess, about the time I was there initially because it was about 1960 or ’61 or something like that. It had expanded so by 1966, ’67, it had done very well. They had been able to get some external grants and so forth. This meant, in the summer, they would perform a lot new music; they would attract specialists in the performance of new music; there was a fair amount of press associated with it; and there were also opportunities for students to have their pieces played, and to learn a lot because you are in an environment where a great deal is going on. So, you are learning from everything that is going on around you.

The other thing is that the University of Illinois was part—I know I have mentioned this before—was part of a Midwestern Composers Symposium, and every year those students would get together at one of the major University campuses and they would perform. This meant that you got to meet a lot of composers who were all in the Big Ten Universities. That was important because a lot of people I knew and know now, and have established relationships, I met as a student. We were all graduate students. And so that’s an interesting thing because here you had a concentration of very talented people from very good schools, from very solid schools in the Midwest. So, we knew each other, and have continued to know each other.

The other thing that is important about that education to me is that, while we had excellent instruction in music—outstanding performance, outstanding theoretical backgrounds, outstanding composition instruction—we were not in the kind of institutions where there was a major international guru who was there. Unlike, let’s say at Harvard at the time. Walter Piston was there.

Crawford: At Princeton?

Wilson: At Princeton, Milton Babbitt and Roger Sessions were there, and then Babbitt because of the kind of the work he was doing, was a very prominent figure. And also because Babbitt’s whole approach to the study of composition was interesting. Babbitt had a background in math, and the whole point of looking at the cognitive side of composition, and looking at that as a sort of driving force, you know. As a result, that represented one pole of compositional thought in the country. That is, to what degree—what are you doing as a composer? I mean, are you creating a logical kind of system in sound that is meaningful, or is it just the outpouring of emotions, or what are you doing? I mean, those issues.

I think, certainly, that’s been a balance that has moved back and forth for hundreds of years in composition, in the written tradition of composition. But, there are periods where one pole seems to dominate more than the other, and this was a period when the ascendancy of the intellectual approach to
composition began to be raised into a very high level. And since this hadn’t been raised to the same degree, even though it existed before, in the Renaissance, certainly in the nineteenth century. The nineteenth century ideal of music as an expression of emotions, music as an expression—or even expressionist, even both the impressionists or the expressionists idea of the inner feeling, you know, without necessarily thinking about the structural aspects of sound. And how organized sound, to use Varèse’s term, “organized sound” in a meaningful relationship, passes on another kind of information which is important, and we should think about that. That idea was being articulated very, very strongly, and, in an institution of higher learning, then the question becomes, “What are you learning?” You know—if we can’t deal with feelings, what are you really learning? What do you really mean by analysis, and how do we define these parameters? So, that debate was going on—the thought side, the theoretical side, became somewhat speculative and some of it looking at what was tried and true, but looking at it in a broader sense was also there.

Then, also, this was also at the time of the ascendancy, at least the knowledge of the twelve tone system, which people thought of as being intellectual—it didn’t have to be—but people thought of it in that way. If you look at Babbitt’s and George Pearl’s explanation of what this system is, as a system in which certain rules occur, there is a certain internal logic that occurs. Then, you can understand it as an intellectual issue.

Crawford: When I asked you if you had wanted to write like Babbitt, or you felt you should be writing like Babbitt because that was so fashionable, and you said, “No, not really.”

Wilson: Yes, not really. The point I am making here, and this is directly relevant to that question, is that because we were in the Midwest—I am convinced that it had to do with the fact that we were in the Midwest—we were being exposed to—I mean, well this is even back in Washington University.

I remember as an undergraduate at Washington University, when Milton Babbitt came through. You know, he was giving lectures and there were some performance of his music. He came and we all sat at his feet and listened and marveled at his intellect. He was a very intelligent person and he had raised a lot of issues that most of us hadn’t seriously thought about, and it was very provocative. And that was about the time, shortly before he wrote his famous article, “Who Cares if You Listen?” Of course, he wrote that sort of tongue and cheek, but people assumed that it really meant, “Who cares if you listen, composers are writing for composers, you numbskulls, if you weren’t smart enough to figure it out, the hell with you!” That’s the way it was taken. There was a little of that, but it wasn’t quite that blatant. But, at any rate, Babbitt came and we sat at Babbitt’s feet and listened to what he had to say and so forth. On another occasion, John Cage comes through—and this is the other opposite sphere—who says, “Let music be. Don’t try to compose and control
it. That’s the problem. Composers are trying to control things and they shouldn’t. They should just let it be.” I mean, his interpretation was Zen Buddhism, his “Let it just happen,” you know and “Let things be. And, matter a fact, what I want to do is compose composers out of existence.” This sort of contrary, contrarian point of view, “Compose composers out of existence.”

Wilmot: What did you make of that?

Wilson: Well, that whole point was then another provocateur kind of statement. The idea being that there are a lot of things that are important that we should listen to, that we should become attendant to, and we should also listen to chance and we should also allow ourselves to explore chance—

Crawford: And listen to silence!

Wilson: —and silence is the perfect example of letting things be. That is, you go and you write a piece, eight and a half seconds, you know, eight minutes—what is it, “four minutes and thirty three seconds,” I think. The idea of this piece, the premise of this piece is that a composer announces a piece, “Four minutes and Thirty-three seconds,” I have forgotten exactly the numbers. But, the performer goes and sits at the keyboard, four minutes and thirty-three seconds. And the audience, not knowing what this is about, when no sound occurs, begins to sort of mumble a little bit; somebody titters and somebody says something else, and there is this little uproar, and then all these ambient sounds are occurring, and that’s really the piece, you know. The audience makes the piece, and that’s “Coge’s” idea. So, its conceptual in the sense that, we are gonna think about what we are doing. When you have a group of people and they are sitting in an audience, and they are waiting, they are focusing on this person to do something. But, you could then turn the terms of the relationship, and have the audience actually making the piece, and that’s sort of what it’s about.

Wilmot: Was that exciting to you?

Wilson: Yeah, well no. What was interesting to me were the things that grew out of that. That is, instead of saying, “I must control every aspect of everything that we do,” which was one pole, he says that, “There are some things that happen in the moment. There are some things that you can allow.” And you have a continuum from complete control to complete anarchy, you know, where anything goes. But within that continuum, there are things that are chance music, in which you sort of know in general what you are going to have happen, but you don’t tell explicitly what that is. Or choice music, when you say, “It could be this, this, this or this,” and you choose what’s going to happen, and each piece becomes something different. Or, on a simple level, on another level, there’s a range of various kinds of improvisation. Now, improvisation is never chance. Improvisation is always within a stylistic context. You are making things up, but it is within an understood musical
context. So, there are certain kinds of things. If you are playing within any style, let’s say in jazz. If you are playing in a jazz style, and you are playing something that’s wrong, everybody knows it’s wrong. I mean, “This doesn’t work with that, even though it’s improvised, it doesn’t work with that.” On the other hand, if you say, “This is ‘avant-garde jazz,’ where I am not using tonality, [I want you to do something.]” If you start playing B flat blues, straight B flat blues, that doesn’t go either. In other words, there are certain things that are understood to comprise the rules of this game, and you’ve gotta understand those. But, within that, there are opportunities that are indeterminate. So, the term indeterminacy becomes true. That is, you specify some of the things, but not all of it.

Crawford: You were in the middle, literally in the middle, and all of these ideas were being flooded in upon you. How did this, how did they impose upon you, or how did you receive them?

Wilson: Well, I think that’s one of the things that made being in the Midwest at that point in my life important because, in the Midwest, there were some excellent teachers around, but there weren’t the giants in the field who were leading a philosophical movement.

Crawford: An advantage, would you say?

Wilson: That’s right. Because a person would come through, and they would say, “This is the way it is.” And another person would come through and they would say, “This is the way it is,” and it would be the diametric opposite. But, after they would leave, then everybody would sit around and talk, “Well, what did you think about that? What do you think about that?” And people would have different positions. So, it would shake things up. You certainly would be thinking about it, and you couldn’t just go ahead with the basic assumptions you had. I mean you could, but you were changed because there was somebody seriously questioning the basic assumptions that you thought existed before.

Crawford: How confusing.

Wilson: But, it was healthy in the sense that you began to then look at that, and saying, “What of this is meaningful to me? There are parts of it I like, but other things I don’t like. So, let’s take this good part. There are parts of the other thing that I like, but some of the other things.”

Now, so when you ask me about serialism. It was at that time—and this probably started at Washington University because it was all part of the studying too—that, as a composer who is going to be teaching composition, hopefully someday, you should know about what is going on. And when people are talking about serial technique, what does that mean, and what is
twelve tone technique? So, what did we do? We studied Schoenberg’s scores, we studied Webern’s scores, we studied Berg’s scores.

Crawford: Exercises, more or less.

Wilson: Well, we studied their scores, and tried to figure out how they worked. And, then somebody occasionally saying, “Write a piece in the style of,” which is a model concept which has been one way of approaching composition from “time in memorial,” at least at an earlier stage. So, you would say, “Let’s do this.” So, there were pieces that I wrote that were “in the style of,” and then some of my own composition was influenced by that. I mean, it’s not that it was—it was never totally all twelve tone pieces.

Crawford: You mean past Illinois because Illinois was such a brief time?

Wilson: Yeah, well no. This actually started in Washington University. Even a piece that I wrote in Washington University, part of it was partially influenced by my understanding of serial techniques. It wasn’t complete serial technique, and it certainly wasn’t complete twelve tone, but it used some of the kinds of writing, and some of the ways of thinking that existed in twelve-tone music. Later on, when I wrote a piece in 1960—this was the piece I was trying to think of—

Wilmot: Was it “Wry Fragments,” or “Two Dutch Poems?”

Wilson: “A Piece for Four.” No, that was at Oberlin; that was ’66 wasn’t it.

Crawford: That was ’66, “A Piece for Four.”


Wilmot: I was really interested in precisely that. Within the context of this discussion about how you were receiving all these different kinds of ways of thinking about composing, how did that manifest itself in these pieces? In particular, “Two Dutch Poems,” “Wry Fragments,” which I think may have been your thesis piece, I am not sure.

Wilson: Right, actually, I don’t even know if I had a thesis piece at the University of Illinois.

Wilmot: “Wry Fragments” was from the Florida years.

Wilson: Yeah, that’s from Florida. But, so the pieces, “Prelude,” “Two Dutch Poems,” “Structure for Orchestra,” “String Quartet.” I think those are the main pieces that I wrote at the University of Illinois. Now, “Structure for Orchestra,” I know, was clearly influenced by my understanding of serial techniques,
though it wasn’t a complete serial piece. “Prelude in Line Study” had a few basic things—and that one goes back to ’59—but fundamentally was not a serial piece. “Trio” for flute, cello, and piano was not a serial piece. “Two Dutch Poems,” I think, may have been influenced by some of the gestures that are associated with serial music.

Wilmot: Gestures?

Wilson: Gestures. Some of the musical gestures. Some of the shape of phrasing and so forth that you associate with that. And “String Quartet” had something to do with that. But, it was also influenced by the other things, the other things that I had been doing before.

So, anyway, the point is that being exposed to both of these things, it presented me with new ideas, different ways of doing it, but for me, since composition has always been a personal thing, I always thought of it as something that had to be filtered through my own personal experience. So, you’ve got these ideas; “are any of them relevant?” Will this really help you in doing what you want to do? And some of it was. I was really fascinated with indeterminacy because of my background in jazz, and my background of understanding the excitement that’s generated from collaborative kind of playing on the spot. So, I wanted to try to use that, or try to discover that. As a matter of fact, in my own composition, some of the things I do and always have done, is to improvise some way, and to improvise and sort of discover where this is going to take you. Now, I understand that that’s not a very efficient way, but it’s a very satisfying way for certain reasons because when you improvise, you are thinking instantaneously about how to make sense out of something in the immediate timeframe. And once in a while you are able to hit something. The problem is that you can spend a lot of time before you hit that sublime moment. You know, so it might take a lot of time doing this before you get something that really works.

If you separate yourself from the actual process of making music, of making sounds yourself, and you think and you do it through your head. You force yourself, “Don’t touch any sound-making things.” I’m going to sit at this desk, and I am going to think through a segment of a piece or maybe the beginning of the piece or a concept of something, that you’re thinking of. And, maybe I will use graphic kind of notation to try to get through this, and to give me a sense of what the larger proportions of the piece [are]. And by doing that, I am able to deal with a lot of things without being hindered by which note follows immediately upon the next one. If I’ve got a good enough idea and a good enough sense about it, then I can always go back and do that. But I always want to know where I am going and thinking about how I want to go, so I am not focused at that particular moment, on the details of how you do that.
I think the technique of the composer as being the ability to create the kind of score, if you are working for live musicians, which is a reflection of what you are thinking in your head. That is, you know, so the compositional technique is sharp or not so sharp if you can think of something and then you can go and say, “If you write it out this way, then this is what you get.” So, you minimize the number of surprises. There is a difference in the internal world of sound, and the external world of sound. I mean, your “sonorous image,” to use the term, I think, that Copland uses, is the ability to imagine sounds in your head. Everybody has it to a certain degree.

Crawford: So, you are not talking about architecture, per se, you are talking about—

Wilson: No, I am talking about the sounds, so the sonorous image. Everybody has it to recall. If I were to ask you to think of your favorite tune, or think of “Jingle Bells” right now, you could run “Jingle Bells” through your memory. You know, you can hear the pitches, you know. I don’t know, you might not hear it in the same key but that—

Wilmot: Oh, I would. Just kidding. [laughs]

Wilson: [Laughs] Then, you’ve got perfect pitch, good, okay. Most people can recall that. On the other hand, if you just think of something and you are trying to imagine something, this marvelous musical event that you imagine. Now, I think composers develop abilities to be able to do this, to greater or lesser degrees and it depends. And I think that the more that you do it, the better you get at it, and I am convinced, given the history of music, that the ability to imagine, in the abstract, is not directly proportional to composing what we call extraordinary music. Case in point is this: we all know of Mozart, and that’s the classic ideal of a composer. One who apparently had this genius-like quality of being able to imagine music that is just sublime, and simply write it down immediately. Go home, the next night, da da da, the piece is done, and it’s a brilliant piece, over and over again. He had that ability. Of course, he was working within certain conventions, but still, he had a different, unique concept, of doing it, and he obviously had the ability to generate very, very clear musical ideas in his mind, and then quickly commit them to paper and they were excellent. On the other hand, there is the other example of Beethoven, who we know, thank goodness, from his sketchbooks, had to work. That is, it didn’t just come fully blown to him. He worked them out: he made the middle the beginning and the end; and he decided which sketches were the best.

Crawford: He worked through instruments, too, didn’t he?

Wilson: Yeah, he worked through instruments, and he worked at the piano, and sometimes he would groan up and so forth. On the other hand, at the end of his life he was deaf. And he wrote this music. So, he had to have this inner idea there, or an incredible musical memory to be able to do that, so he could
write because he couldn’t literally hear. So, you have these extremes. In both cases there is a sonorous image, but in the case of Beethoven, he also had to work through the idea, and I think most composers work through. Stravinsky, for example, according to everything we know about him, played everything at the piano. He literally plucked through it, you know.

Crawford: He was said to have said. “Every time I sit down to write a piece, I am terrified.” Do you ever experience that?

Wilson: Of course. Of course, that’s all the time.

Crawford: And I don’t mean just when you have a commission, but when you have an inspiration.

Wilson: Sure, sure. Well, it depends. There are some times when things sort of appear to you full-blown. I mean, it’s amazing. That “sonorous image” is what I am talking about, where you suddenly, in the blink of an eye, in an immediate kind of sense, something comes to you, and it’s very clear and you know exactly how it will work in the composition you are writing.

Crawford: What piece would that be, if you could give us an example?

Wilson: Well, I will tell you one piece. You know, “Piece for Four.” By the way, I just came back from Cleveland, they did a concert of my music, and they did “Piece for Four.” Now, “Piece for Four” was written in 1964 and that’s a piece that hadn’t been done that often, since it was done a lot in the sixties.

Crawford: Why did they choose it?

Wilson: You know, they asked me to come look at some music. They just looked through the publisher’s list of my music, then they listened to recordings and they said, “Oh, we would like to do this piece.”

Crawford: What do you think of this piece?

Wilson: It was good to hear that. It was good to hear it again. I thought it was great. I said, “Hey, I wrote that in ’66.” Let’s see how old was I, then?

Crawford: Now, is that one that you developed in your head, and then, like Mozart, you wrote it out?

Wilson: The first part of that, ba da da da dee da, ba de da. [sings] I know exact—I remember that this sort of gesture sort of came to me as a sort of arresting beginning of a piece. It just came to me very quickly and I wrote it down—not the whole piece—but I wrote down that major seminal gesture, which shaped the whole piece ultimately. Now, that was something that came very quickly and very dramatically.
Wilmot: Where did it come from?

Wilson: I don’t know. You know, the inner recesses of one’s imagination, you guess.

Crawford: Would you like it today? In retrospect, you like it all these years later?

Wilson: Oh! Yes! Yes! Yes! I like that. I think, in every case, in every piece I have ever written, there has to be a moment somewhere, whether I am sitting at a desk trying to invoke this something, but there has to be something in the piece, or a movement that is the “there, there,” if you will; that is the kernel of the idea from which everything else comes. And sometimes it comes really quickly, and sometimes I work, and work, and work, and then I get it, and then I go. But, there has to be some musical idea that motivates the new piece.

Now, I could—you have a certain amount of technique. If I had to—like one of the things we do for our PhD students is that when they take their orals, what we do is to give them an instrumentation, let’s say a string quartet or a mixed group or whatever, and we say, “Go home and write a piece using these instruments, and bring it back in a week.” What we are trying to ascertain is their ability to have enough compositional technique in the sense that I talked about earlier, to be able to come up with something that makes sense, is logical, and is complete. It doesn’t have to be real long, but we usually expect at least four or five minutes, and that the piece has some sense of shape, some sense of structure, there’s some internal logic that they can defend, and that you can understand. But, they can create, they can use any technique they want to use. Now, they can’t go home and say, “I sat at the piano for four minutes and thirty-three seconds.” Now, that, they can’t do. Because it is about control, as opposed to being aware, so that we ask them to write a piece. That is, assuming there is enough technique there.

Now, so as a composer, I can do that. I mean like this piece I did for Orpheus. You know, if I said, [claps hands] “I gotta do it,” then I could do it. But unless it is inspired, for me, unless it’s really inspired, it’s not marketable.

Crawford: Do you get a writer’s block?

Wilson: Oh yes.

Crawford: There are just days when you can’t—?

Wilson: Yes, there are days when you can’t—you are not inspired. It could be days, it could be weeks, you know, when there is nothing that’s really the kind of idea, the quality that you think is of substance. Now, I think there is another thing. By working in the creative fields for so long, you do develop the ability of discernment, to determine, at least for you, whether this makes more sense than that. And you’ve got to be your own best critic, you know, because, ultimately... And, actually, the angst side of being a composer or any creative
artist is—I mean everybody didn’t cut off their ear and that kind of stuff [chuckles]—but the self-critical side is tough. And if you are honest, at least for me, if you are honest, you know that X is better than Y. And, when you are depressed, at least for me—I don’t know if other people do—when you are depressed about this, the best way to work out of a depression, is to go back to something that you’ve done that you think is good, and hear it again. And say, “Oh, that really was inspired.” Now, until the day that I go back to something that I think that was inspired, and suddenly it’s not inspiring anymore, that’s when you say—“that’s it” — that’s when you really give up.

Wilmot: What do you go back to now?

Wilson: Oh, almost any of the works. Almost any of the pieces that I think are really good. I mean like, Sinfonia for orchestra. When I go out and talk about my music, there are certain pieces for certain audiences I use. Like, for example, I gave a lecture at Oberlin, and talked about my music and talked about how I make music.

Crawford: Just now.

Wilson: Yes, just a couple weeks ago. I did the same thing at Cleveland State too. And what I talked about at Cleveland State was a piece called “Trio.” And I talked about that piece because of the structural aspects of that piece. And this was a graduate composition seminar. And how you put it together, the nuts and bolts, I thought would be interesting to them. So, I talked about that, and the conception of the piece.

The idea behind that piece is the idea of looking at different kinds of musical time: musical time that’s chronological, directed, time directed motion that’s linear, going from A to B, teleological time. That kind of time, as opposed to time that’s very static, when you aren’t going towards a goal, when you are simply sitting there, and therefore, when something happens, even though it’s just a single isolated event, it has a greater significance because it’s in a surrounding in which not much has happened. But, if you can create a continuum, from the kind of time which non-purposeful, in the sense that, even though activities may be very fast, but they are very static, you know, like a [twittering machine?], you know [makes noise] something is going on, and after a while you don’t pay any attention. For example, just like the sounds that are coming from these lights. We have been sitting in this room for an hour and a half, two hours, something like that—

Wilmot: An hour.

Wilson: An hour, and you know nobody paid any attention to the sounds of that light. Because it’s always there. You know, it’s like music of the spheres. Is there really a music of the spheres or is there not music of the spheres? And, you know the philosophical argument that it’s there, but you don’t hear it because
it’s always there and you sort of block it out. Here, we know that there is sound; the physicists can measure it; you can hear it now that I call it to your attention, but our minds tend to wipe out things that aren’t considered significant. So, we just adjust to it and we mask it.

But if you are sitting in a stage and there is a [proscenium?] and somebody’s up there and they are supposed to be doing something that titillates you, or to entertain you, or to inform you, and they don’t do much, you are listening very hard because you want to give them a chance, and so you get [sings] “dong” [pause] “Dong.” [sings at lower pitch] What expectations do I set up, and why do we follow? What’s the narrative? Is there a narrative? And what is the narrative and why does it work? So, if one of the purposes of the piece is to try to create a musical structure in which you literally are changing the nature of how one experiences time, you know, building on—starting with things that are very static to things that are very purposeful directed—you are going toward a goal—that intensifies both experiences. And that became the idea of the piece. So, composers can understand—most people can understand that. Composers can understand that, and then we start talking about how I did this, techniques that I used. Then that’s one kind of thing.

On the other hand, if there is a different piece. If it is for a group of people who are looking at expressivity, you know, there are a couple of pieces that I have written because I was consciously attempting to express some very clear things about me. Like the second movement of Sinfonia. So, that is a perfect piece to play for that. Also, to show that it’s not either/or. One does not have to say, “I am only going to write music like this, or I don’t want to show my emotions on my sleeve—you know, I will never do that—so I will write pieces that are logical and deal with meaning in a different way.” I say, “It’s not either or, it’s both/and, why should you eschew anything.” Take the whole thing! And, whatever is appropriate in a particular piece, you do that. So, that’s been my approach.

Crawford: Olly, can I move you over there because the light is dimming.

Wilson: Sure, sure.

Wilmot: That actually should be the end of that. I have a question, but I will ask you when we are back on tape. [interview interruption]

Crawford: I think we should move onto Florida now. Find out about experiences there because that must have been a real eye opener, politically.

Wilson: Yes, Illinois was pivotal, in the sense of first coming to age as a composer, understanding in a broader sense, what it means to be an artist and what it means to be a composer, and choosing paths and situating yourself in a climate in which there were a lot of different choices, and finding something that’s important about what you are doing. So, that was why Illinois was
important—and also, as a place where you really developed your craft as a composer, you know, your discipline, your skill, your technique as a composer, the ability to be able to do it—to be able to write—

Crawford: Wasn’t it hard to leave that wonderful, it sounds like such a great and interesting climate? Then, you have to go to work.

Wilson: Yes and then you go there and it is great and you are learning and you are young. I mean, I am twenty-one, twenty-two, at that point, and you think you’re pretty—and then, since I went through fast. I was always the kind of person, “You’ve got to go through fast.” Instead of taking two years, I did it in a year and a half. I mean, it usually was two years, but I did it in a year and a half because I was married and I wanted to earn some money. So, all those things were motivations, and I wanted to get on with my career.

Wilmot: I have a question for you. I want to move on to Florida A&M as well, but I have this one question, which is: you and Carolyn have discussed a really exciting time when you were just learning about composing and different schools of thought and conceptual composing. And I am wondering how did those circles treat the musical traditions, or perceive the musical traditions that you had grown up with in the church and also when you were playing jazz music in St. Louis?

Wilson: Essentially, nonexistent. I mean, the invisible man concept becomes very relevant there. As in academia, and in institutions of higher learning, aspects of African American culture just weren’t part of it, I mean, it just wasn’t part of the curriculum. Not in a real serious way. So that I went all through college, never learning anything about, in a serious scholarly way, about any of the traditions I grew up with as a child. It just wasn’t seen to be important. People gave lip service to jazz because a lot of the people who taught in the college loved jazz, and gave lip service to it, but there were no courses in jazz. There was no understanding of what was going on in this tradition, and it was just seen as “It’s out there. If you want to do it, do it.” But it certainly wasn’t part of the curriculum, and it wasn’t discussed.

Wilmot: So, it wasn’t part of that universe?

Wilson: It just wasn’t part of the universe. There was a clear line of demarcation between what is subsequently referred to as the “vernacular traditions” and the “cultivated traditions.” The cultivated traditions were the province of institutions of higher learning, and the vernacular traditions were not. So, it didn’t make any difference—any vernacular tradition. That includes all folk music, which certainly included all pop music, and those things that you have difficulty categorizing, like jazz, you know, or blues, or any of those things just weren’t part of that. So, I knew that, and at the time, it is like the music of the spheres again, if that’s the way it is, that’s the way it is. At a certain point, you’re there trying to learn and you are talking about, “What is this, and why
is it considered important?” and so at that point you don’t—. Since I always had this sort of double consciousness anyway, there was a world in which I lived where these other things occurred that I knew of and I valued and I tried to do. But, on the other hand, I knew that in the academic world and in the intellectual world—not the intellectual world—in the academic institutions that these were not things that were being seriously discussed at that time.

Now, having said that, I think it is fair to also say that the first inklings of some change were beginning to occur. Things were on the horizon. I think back at Washington University, I know we want to get to Florida, but I don’t know if I have mentioned this before—did I mention Oliver Nelson at all?

Crawford: Yes, you did.

Wilson: Okay. I did mention Oliver. I may have even made this statement about Oliver. Oliver came to Washington University as a special student, and studied with Robert Wykes who was my teacher.

Crawford: I talked to Dr. Wykes.

Wilson: Right, oh you did talk to him?

Crawford: He is such a nice guy.

Wilson: Oh yeah, he is a great guy.

Crawford: He said a wonderful thing. I said, “What was your first impression of Olly,” and he said, “Well, I saw him striding across campus, and I was working” and I forget what you were doing, and “I saw that he was working and he was an aspiring composer, ‘He was a mighty young man.’” And I just loved that. [laughter]

Wilmot: Oh, that is so beautiful.

Wilson: Yeah, sure.

Crawford: We had a very nice conversation. We’ll get together when he comes to see you.

Wilson: That’s good, I am glad you got to talk to him. He’s a great guy, really a marvelous person, and really—

Crawford: —Thinks the world of you, and had lots of great things to say, and we will get to that.

Wilson: Yeah, he was great for me. And really and it set a model because he was not only a teacher, but a friend. He took me in, you know, he literally took me in,
in the sense that he opened his home; we had lessons over there; I met his family and his kids; and that was really unusual to at those time, in 1955. I mean, all of our professors didn’t do that. I must say that though, as I mentioned, I was a pioneer at the time at Washington University—We talked about Washington University?

Crawford: We covered that pretty much.

He said that he just recognized your talent and he said, “I just let him go.” I said, “Well, what advice, what instruction?” “I just let him go. I knew he could do it, and I said, ‘Do what you can do.’”

Wilson: Yeah, he gave me—well first, the idea of being a serious composer, and to devote and give your best. I mean, that was really important. And to be self-critical. It was always supportive, I mean, even when he thought, maybe this wasn’t the best thing that I did, he would say it in such a way that it never questioned—he never made you question your own abilities. “Can this be better? What if you did this? Do you think this would be better?” and it was “Oh, great,” so that gave me a sense of “Okay, okay.” You know it was really important. He never said this—“This is crap.”

Crawford: Well, I said, “What would you say about Olly Wilson’s career?” [phone rings] and he said, “It has been a great crescendo.” [hearty laughter] So, that was a nice thing to say. He thought that you kind of became politically aware later on.

Wilson: I did, I did.

[interview interruption]

Wilson: Moving to Florida. Well, the sixties. The sixties sort of made everybody aware. I was—we were becoming somewhat aware and somewhat politically motivated in the fifties because I had participated in both the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People] and CORE [Congress of Racial Equality], in sit-ins around St. Louis, and in test cases that we would make. And there were situations at Washington University where most of the little cafes close to the university wouldn’t serve blacks, and so forth. At one point, there were boycotts of these places—attempts to change the places. So, that was going on. We are talking about ’57, ’58, ’59 and Rosa Parks is about ’55, ’56. You know, the Montgomery bus boycott is ’56, ’57. So, all of this stuff is just coming along. 1960, it hits. It hits first in a personal way because my decision to go to Florida A&M. The decision was simple because it was the only job offer I got. The decision was either you go there or you are teaching high school.

Crawford: They wouldn’t have kept you on at Illinois?
Wilson: No, because at Illinois, I was just another graduate student and they weren’t hiring graduate students, except as graduate teaching assistants, as long as you are enrolled in school. So, what was I going to do? Either teach in a high school, work at the post office, or take this job. So, for me it was a difficult decision, but not too hard in terms of what the options were. And, the biggest thing was seeing if Elouise agreed, which she did. And so we set out.

Now, the trip to Florida—I don’t want to be over dramatic, but I think it’s really important. Did I talk about that trip ever?

Crawford: No.

Wilson: Okay, well now you get some more folklore. But that’s the context of this whole development. So, I am an idealistic twenty-two year old now. I am twenty-two years old. I have got a master’s degree, which is the degree you can now use to teach at college. This was fall of 1960. I get the job two weeks before school starts. And I am twenty-two years old and really fairly young, and thought I knew everything, you know, because you always think you know everything at that age.

So, I moved on to Florida A&M, and I knew that I didn’t know everything about the Deep South, although I knew—I had grown up in Missouri, which is a borderline state. There were never any signs, never any back of the bus stuff, but there were places that we knew we couldn’t go. I mean, there were restaurants downtown, the best theatres downtown, we couldn’t go to, nice restaurants downtown you couldn’t go to, but there was a sprawling black community which was very diverse and there were very nice Black restaurants and very nice Black theatres and things like that. So, we didn’t really see it as a real problem. We saw it as a problem, but one of those large problems, you know, one of those large, major problems that you can't, by yourself, do anything about. So, you don’t really think about applying resistance, you know, except in an organized way.

Now, there was some of that too. Because at the back of having said that I remember, and I think I mentioned, about high school when we took this first act of civil disobedience that I participated in. In high school we had this strike, but that was to get a better, segregated school. It wasn’t about integration; it was getting a better, segregated school. But, that was the first step to address some of the larger issues.

Okay, so we are going to Florida A&M. Now, we take a train from St. Louis. In order to get to Florida from St. Louis—I mean, airfare was so expensive in those days, nobody I knew would ever think about flying. At least nobody in my economic circumstances would think about flying from St. Louis to Florida. You didn’t travel that way. You traveled on the train or on the bus, and the bus was out of the question because it was too long, and even less comfortable, and so you traveled by train, and that was the way people
traveled. My parents were from Arkansas. Whenever they went to Arkansas, they would go by train, and everybody else I knew went by train. Air travel was very expensive, and not many people did it, that I knew in 1959, 1960.

Okay, so we are taking the train. Now, problem number one, this is interstate transport. The question of segregation loomed large in that sector because it wasn’t really clear. That is, there were some laws that had been passed that ostensibly regulated segregation on interstate travel, but they weren’t rigorously enforced, which meant that above the Mason-Dixon line—that is where Arkansas hits Missouri—generally, things were pretty much integrated, you know, on a train. Generally, there were some exceptions, but generally. Below the Mason-Dixon Line there was kind of a laissez faire attitude about that, and so you could reasonably expect that you were going to have some problems to deal with segregation in interstate transport. So, we board the train in full knowledge of that.

So, we get on the train. Now, when we get on in St. Louis—this big Union Station in St. Louis—we get on the train and we’re going South, and it was a crowded train; it was an integrated train. The white folks and the black folks and everybody else were all on the same train and it was difficult to get a seat just because of all the people, but we got on the train. So, we are going down South and I said, “Okay, so far so good,” you know, “it’s not the back of the bus yet.” So, we get on the train and we are going, and as we go South, I am sure right when we passed this Mason-Dixon Line, when we hit Arkansas, I noticed, it was very gradual, I looked around, and there seemed to be less and less white people. And, there was more room though.[laughs] There were less and less, and then finally, there were no other white people on the train. And, you know, the train stops and cars hook up. We were paying very little attention to that, but suddenly, there aren’t any more white people on the train on our car.

So, we are going down, and of course, we had known that going to a dining car was really risky, you probably weren’t going to get served in the Deep South, and besides, dining cars were expensive, so we said we will buy lunch or carry lunches with us. So, we had lunches with us and so forth. But, our destination was New Orleans, which was a long way down. The way we had to go was straight down the Mississippi River on the train track to New Orleans, and then get another transfer from New Orleans to Tallahassee, going east. Which took a couple of days, you know, in those days. So, we get on the train. When we hit Arkansas, less white folks. By the time we hit Mississippi, we notice that—I think we might have had to change cars or something—but not only was it all black, but the car, at this point, was dusty. Because windows were open, and I think this car must have been close to the engine or something because there was more dirt and stuff coming in. Elouise had on this beautiful crinoline dress, pink dress, and of course it was getting dustier, and we both noticed this dress was getting dirtier, and you go “Oh my gosh, this is terrible.”
We also noticed a couple of other things. So, they had changed us—clearly this was a black car. We were in a less comfortable position on the train. Of course there wasn’t anybody going to any dining car; I don’t even know, by that time, if the train even had a dining car. But, by the time we got to Mississippi, every now and then the train would stop, in a field or something. Out of nowhere, people would pop up! Selling food, candy, or sandwiches or something, and I was going, “Well, how are these—?” I guess that must have been the mode. You know, people knew about that and would come there and they would sell stuff to the black people who were on the train. So that was the way to get food, so we did a little of that.

Then, we get to New Orleans. And so by then, we said, “Okay, well, welcome to the Deep South, you know you are here now.” So, we get to New Orleans, and some of those train stations we went through were certainly nowhere near like the beautiful Union Station in St. Louis, and the conditions, in general, looked pretty bad. You go into the Deep South, you are passing by some of the places by the train station where people live, which are really pretty funky places. The “sticks,” you know, the “other side of the tracks,” literally, it was there. The shotgun houses, and all that. You could see and all that. Now, it wasn’t a shock to me. There were some places in St. Louis that were slums that were bad, that we knew about and so forth, but this was a little bit different from what I knew—this was even worse than stuff that I was accustomed to seeing in the slums of St. Louis.

So, anyway, we get to New Orleans. Now, New Orleans comes as a big shock. Get to New Orleans, brand new station, brand new station, beautiful station. But, our first experience with real Jim Crow: whites only, coloreds only. And there was this brand-new station and separate but equal! I mean, on one side, there must have been about fifty or so rows of seats, you know, long places where we could sit down and wait for the next train, and that said “Whites only.” So, whites were sitting on that side, and facing them directly were coloreds, all the coloreds. So, you’re sitting right across from each other like this, and that was a real different experience for me. You know, there were the colored fountains, the white fountains, and all this stuff. And you know, being exposed to that the first time was kind of, “Uh oh, what have we done?” you know, “How are we going to make it through this?” Because she always thought something terrible was going to happen. So, there you are, and then I said, “Here I am,” and I remember reflecting, “God, this is crazy. There’s people that are going the same place, but they’re on this side and we’re on this side, and we are facing each other.” I guess they were saying, “Okay, this is federal money; we’ve got separate but equal stuff.” So, at that point, one of the few times it really was separate but equal. Usually, it is separate and unequal, but this was separate but equal, in New Orleans. And of course, can you imagine New Orleans, as complicated as race is, and all that stuff is in Louisiana, especially in New Orleans, I mean it was a mess. Anyway, there you were.

At that occasion, something happened because we had to change because we were getting off of the one track, train that went from north to south, and now we are at
New Orleans. Now we have to get on another train that is going east. I literally was not able to check our luggage all the way to Tallahassee. We had to get the luggage—and we had about four or five hours wait over there—I had to go and pick up our luggage from St. Louis, in New Orleans, and then re-check it to the other train that’s going to Tallahassee. I guess we didn’t have four or five hours. We had maybe a couple hours. Which meant that Elouise heard the call of the train, and she had to go to board the train, while I was still getting the luggage, but I still had enough time to check the luggage and then come and get on the train. Well, so she goes and gets in the train—this is her side of the story—I am checking the luggage, and she gets in the train. When she gets in the train, she notices that this is a brand new, beautiful, clean car, and she looked in the corner and nobody else was there but white folks, you know. So, she was wondering, “Well, maybe I am in the wrong car.” Especially in our experience, since we started out in a mixed car, now it’s an all-black car and the white folks are somewhere, and then out of that car, and then we get there and then she gets in this car.[laughs] Now, Elouise is light skinned, and sometimes, if you don’t look at her right, you know, you might not know what race she is, you know. So, she was afraid people didn’t look at her right, so she came out, because she thought, “Well, if I get on this car and then Olly comes, they are definitely going to send him to the black car, and I will be up here and he will be at that end. I don’t know”—Because she was concerned, you know. So, anyway, she was sitting there, and she was asking the porter, “Are you sure?” You know, the porter was black, and she is like, “Are you sure? Look at me carefully now, are you sure I am supposed to be on this car?” He said, “Yes Ma’am, you are supposed to be on that car.” So, she gets on that car, but she is really quite concerned.

Then, at the same time, she saw a lot of other people, some of whom were black, keep going past her to get on this train, but none of them are getting on this car. So, then it was about ten minutes before the car was supposed to leave. I finally come, and to her relief, the guy points to me to get on the car. It just so happened that nobody—there weren’t any other blacks who were going the same place we were going, and hence not in that car, but she didn’t know it, and I wouldn’t have known it either, and we thought, “Well, wait a minute, what’s going on?”

So, we get on the car, it turned out that—this is the deep South now, we are going through Louisiana, through Mississippi, through Alabama, and Florida, you know the deep, deep South, right near the coast. And, here is an integrated car. And we were coming down from St. Louis, and it was a segregated car. You know, so it was this kind of—you never knew what was going to happen. So, we are going across the states, very nice car, still no dining room, no dining car, or if there was, we didn’t look for it, because, you know, we figured we wanted to leave sleeping dogs—you know, we just want to get there. So, we get there, and then we get off the train.

When we get off the train, it is early Sunday morning. We had started leaving on that Friday night, so now it is early Sunday morning. And we get off the train, and it’s a beautiful day, and the birds are cheeping at six. The train stops. The train
tracks are on a riverbed and then on one hill, over and away, was Florida State University. There is another hill where, ostensibly, Florida A&M University was, which was where we wanted to go. But, when we got off the train, there is nobody, there is only one taxi driver there. And, the taxi driver is white, so we are going. “Aw, hell. What do we do? We are in the Deep South, and this is a white taxi driver, is he going to take us or is he not?” I mean things like you never think about, but then, when you know things are really segregated—“Should we talk to this guy, is he going to take us? Is he not going to take us?” So, we said, “Well, there is only one way to find out.” We said, “Look, we are going to Osceola Street in Tallahassee and can you take us there?” “Oh, sure, sure, I can take you.” So, we said, “Okay, fine, a fare is a fare, he is going to take us there.” So, we put our luggage, we have a trunk and a lot of luggage because we are coming to live here. And he starts driving.

Well, it turns out that he didn’t know where the hell he was going, and it was Sunday, and we were the only customers so he was going to make a fare some way, so he was driving around. So, he’s driving, and where he drives is what—you have heard of the term “the bottoms?” You know, it’s a term referring to the sort of places that poor blacks would live in the deep South plantation. These were places that were down where there were no paved roads. And the soil down there is red clay. If you have ever heard of red clay and green grass. Really very fertile, but these are where the shotgun houses are and the sharecroppers and people like that. It’s pretty funky stuff. It’s pretty bad, and he is driving through there. So, Elouise takes a look and she said, “Look, I am not staying here. If we have to stay somewhere like this, I am on the next train back. I am not staying here!” And, I was thinking, “I don’t think I want to stay here either.” [laughs] Because it was really bad, really bad. He is driving block after block, and then he would go on, then another one. I said, “I can’t imagine university housing—it wasn’t university, it was a private house—but the guy said it was close to the university, and I don’t see anything that looks like a university to me, and this is really funky, funky stuff.

We had rented an apartment from a person. Somebody in the department—had recommended this guy, and said, “He rents to young faculty members,” and so forth. So, we got there, and it turned out that this Taxi driver didn’t know where the heck he was going, and that finally—and maybe he was just trying to make more money because he did have a little meter, but he was driving around not getting anywhere—I said, “Why don’t you call somebody?” He said, “Oh, yeah.” That’s when I thought, “Well, maybe the guy is just trying to get a little extra money.” So, he called and says, “Where’s the ‘Nigra College’?” “Oh, it’s over, it’s right over, you go up the hill.” So, he said, “Okay, fine.” Then, he turns around and gets out of the Bottoms, and drives up hill, and literally goes up the hill. As you go up the hill and it gets cleaner, it gets nicer. You’re driving through the place, and it’s a nice neighborhood. You see the university, it looks like a university. You drive down the streets, they were paved streets. Then, we got to our apartment, which was a nice place to live in, you know, and on the edge of town.
But, that was our introduction to Florida A&M, and our introduction to the deep South. We learned quickly that there’s a wide range of living, there in the Deep South. And, people of African descent, in the Deep South, there were certain oasis. And one of the oasis, in that context, were the university places. Because I was surprised at the way people lived. I mean, a lot of the people were—this is the elite of the black society at that time. A lot of people, most of the people have very nice houses; some of them had yachts and things, and many of the houses had swimming pools. It’s beautiful Florida and the property was dirt cheap, you know, by comparison to St. Louis. I couldn’t believe it—it was like, how did this happen? This is supposed to be the terrible South.

And it was the terrible South because it was still segregationist South, and anything could happen. Florida politics were corrupt—just like the crooked politics of recent days, it existed back there then. “Porkchop Hill”—the state capitol was right there in Tallahassee, and the segregationists were really riding high.

Crawford: Was the university all black, truly all black?

Wilson: Oh yes. It’s Florida A&M University, it’s a historically black school, and it sits on one hill, and then on another hill in town, there is Florida State University, which was white. Now, they both are integrated. I mean both faculty and students are integrated now, but then it was an all-black school. Matter of fact, it was convenient in those kinds of segregated societies for those things to exist because, first there was the kind of political accommodation that went on. And you had, the Booker T. Washington idea that socially we can be as separate as fingers on a hand, but in things economic, we’ll all come together. So, no social integration, but economic integration, we should do that. So, that was the prevailing philosophy. And what that meant, how that played out was—for example, the governor’s inauguration. The governor had two inaugurations. The governor had an inauguration ball, whenever the new governor—he had it at the state house or something, and for the [phone rings] white folks. Then, he also had a ball, that he would go to first, that was for the black folks. And the elite of the black society would come—

[interview interruption]

Wilson: —And there, people who were government employees, like the President of the University, or other people who had state positions, in the black community, were expected to come. So, you just had this separate and unequal inauguration as well. It was strange. And it was demeaning, too, because these people were very educated people, but they were supposed to be there to congratulate this governor who usually was a crooked politician, and a real segregationist. But, that was the way they had always done it, so that’s the way they did it.
So, that was there, but all of this was beginning to change because freedom rides were going on. People began to raise their social awareness, and began to protest. Having had this experience, obviously affected me, and I became much more politically aware.

Wilmot: What social circle did you and Elouise plug into when you came to Florida A&M?

Wilson: When we came, we plugged into the university social circle. There was something called “The Faculty Club.” The Faculty Club had parties and social life was interesting, and exciting.

Wilmot: I can’t wait until we get to your political analysis of Berkeley.

Wilson: [laughter] That is interesting. But, at any rate, I recognized that as a little kid because I used to play piano for the church, so I used to—and our minister was a medical doctor, and was, you know, an extraordinary person in every. I used to wonder why he had some of these real nincompoops as his officers and so forth. Now, part of that reflected, I guess, his wisdom, in the sense that the church consisted of a wide range of social classes, so you better have strong there. Everybody didn’t have to be upper-middle class, from the black point of view, or at least people who had a certain level of an education. You have got to have some people who are like the lumpen proletariat as well. So, you’ve got to have some people like that, and so he did. But, it also meant that these people knew that they were there because of him, and they knew if they got out of line, they could be gone anywhere.

Socially, I mean, people like to have a good time. I had never had such a good time. I mean, there are all these interesting people there. There would be parties almost every week. It was fun, and you know, we were young, and we loved to dance and we loved to have a good time, and that was just great. And then, you know, the quality of life was good for some wealthy Professors. Some people lived very well. They had yachts, and they were right near the gulf.

And then, Florida A&M had a fabulous football team, and a fabulous band. Florida A&M stands for Agriculture and Mechanical; it’s one of the land grant institutions. People would jokingly say, “It stands for Athletics and Music,” because it was a very strong music department. And I would say, “No, it stands for football team and marching band,” because they had a marvelous football team that routinely beat some other teams one hundred to nothing, ninety-nine to nothing and a Marching Band that was a pioneer in marching very fast and performing music that was associated with African American rhythm and blues, jazz and introducing dramatic choreography that reflected that music.
Yeah, it was just incredible! They had a fantastic pool of people. Matter of fact, I don’t know if you know anything about football now, but if you look at the dominant teams in this country, for the last thirty years—Florida A&M football players would be prominent.

Wilmot: They are all from Florida A&M?

Wilson: They’re from the University of Miami, Florida State, University of Florida, that same gene pool! In those days, this gene pool was segregated! They didn’t have black players playing for those schools. The black players played for Florida A&M. And they not only got that black genetic pool from Florida, but from the Caribbean. So, many Caribbeans would come to Florida A&M.

Wilmot: I wonder about the [Oakland] Raiders within that analysis?

Wilson: Oh, yes. The Raiders, I am sure that they have some people—they must have some players from Florida A&M University. As a matter of fact, I’ll tell you. I don’t know how much—okay. One of the most famous Raiders football players was a player by the name of Raymond Chester. He was a fullback. He was a Florida A&M graduate. Bob Hayes, you have probably heard of Bob Hayes. He was a world track star, and won the gold medal in the Olympics. He was a student at Florida A&M when I was there. He was on the team. He was a third string wide receiver. Even though he could run faster than anybody else, he couldn’t catch the ball as well as some other people who ran almost as fast as he did. So, he was a third string, even though he was a gold medalist. Now, eventually, he became first string, but for many years, he was a third string because he was more of a track star than he was a wide receiver in terms of catching the ball.

The point that I am trying to make is that it was a very exciting place, socially. And it also was important for me because there also were some really excellent professors there, who were about twenty, thirty years older than me, who had been directly or indirectly associated with the Harlem Renaissance. And so I met—a couple by the name of Edmonds, in drama. Randolph Edmonds and his wife, I’ve forgotten her name. A very interesting couple, a very elegant couple. These were people who had an excellent understanding of African American intellectual history. And there were other several painters and choreographers that I met there.

Crawford: Who were on the faculty?

Wilson: Yes they were on the faculty. And suddenly, it was really important—just to meet other people, just interesting and intelligent people who were African American. And it was really good for me at that time because I was very young; I was twenty-two years old. I spent all of my education, after high school, in places where I was one or one or two of the non-white people, and conscious or unconsciously, you begin to associate the academic intellectual
scholarly life with your experience in the larger predominantly white world. And your other life—because you had this double consciousness, with—you know, we were having our fun in the black community because I didn’t leave St. Louis. So, I was going to Washington University, [but] I was going to parties, in what I guess we would refer to as “the ‘hood,” although it was a different kind of ‘hood than what we think of now. [chuckles] So, you know, you think of two different worlds, and you move in and out of these two different worlds. At that point, in a formative stage of development, [phone rings] that just becomes a way of living.

[interview interruption]

Wilson: Where was I?

Wilmot: Okay, we were talking about Florida. I wanted to ask you where you and Elouise lived? I know you started your family there. Is that correct?

Wilson: That’s right.

Wilmot: Is that the first round at Florida A&M?

Wilson: That’s the first round at Florida A&M. Okay, let’s talk about that. We lived on Osceola Street, I don’t remember the address. It turned out to be a pleasant apartment, and it was our first house, outside of our graduate student house that we had. And, instead of being a zero bedroom, you know, which is what our graduate place was, this apartment had a bedroom and a living room, and I guess another room, a little study. So, that was sort of exciting. We spent time decorating it, in a cheap way. And in those days, they had something called eagle stamps—not eagle stamps, but—

Crawford: Green stamps!

Wilson: Green stamps! Green stamps. And you would save so many stamps from groceries, and then you could go to this silly place and pick up your—

Wilmot: Something cute.

Wilson: Yeah, little lamps, and something. And we had had some things shipped down, and there were some real large boxes that we had, and I remember Elouise coming up with the idea of covering those boxes with cloth, and making end tables. I thought that was so clever. We did that, and we had end tables. We had bought a couch because Elouise worked, since she was making a regular salary, and not just a graduate student kind of thing that I was making; we were able to save some money and buy some furniture. So, we bought some furniture, and that was our first little home, and that was great.
Then, at that time, there was a universal draft going on because the Korean War was just over. The Korean War was just over, and in 1957, the Russians sent up Sputnik, and that changed everything. Did we talk about that at all? About the ROTC? I didn’t talk about my ROTC days?

Crawford: No.

Wilson: All right, that is something that I should have talked about. Anyway, let’s skip to Florida.

Wilmot: We can go back to that later. I think it is important.

Wilson: Yeah, we can go back to that later. The point was that there was a universal draft. And at my age, twenty-two—by the time we got there it was twenty-three—there was a likely chance that I would be drafted. And indeed, I did get a letter, “Greetings, come for a medical checkup, a medical analysis of you.” And I said, “But, that was from St. Louis.” I said, “I am in Florida now. I am teaching at a university now. I’ve got students here. It is a public institution. It’s a government service, State University, blah, blah, blah. Can you defer this until June?” They said, “Okay, we will defer it until June.” So, I got a deferral until June, and then, fortunately, Elouise got pregnant. Because, in those days, if you were an expecting father, then you were also not required to go to the draft. So, that’s how, as a result of that, by the time June rolled around I said, “Well, my wife is expecting.” They said, “Okay, you are in a different category.” So, that was the deal. So, Dawn was born. I mean, it wasn’t cause and effect; we were happy that our first child came but that wasn’t the motivation. [chuckles] So, anyway, Dawn was born there, and it was an interesting place.

I remember where I left off before, I was talking about the Edmonds and the people from the Harlem Renaissance. And, those people were important. And what was important was that it saved me, and it made me aware of a black intellectual culture, history. And I became really interested in that and that sort of shaped me, I think, for future years.

But, then, in terms of the development of the family, our first daughter was born there. And then, after two years, I’d realized that I really needed to have a PhD, and I realized that it was necessary to go back and do graduate work there.

Wilmot: You needed it in order to—?

Wilson: In order to stay in academia. And I recognized that though Florida A&M was important for me, I knew it was not the kind of place I could have the kind of career that I wanted because the teaching load was quite heavy. At one point—see I had played double bass, so I was playing double bass—and at that point, another person who came at the same time that I did, who was a
violinist, whose name was Elwyn Adams, up and left in the middle of the year. So, there were no other string players on the faculty, and a large number of their students were majoring in music education, you know, planning to be teachers, and they had to take required courses in string technique, you know, how to hold a violin, how to hold the cello, and basic things, how to finger, basic things. They had no string player to teach that, and I was the only person on the faculty who played a string instrument. Though the double bass is a lot different from a violin, at least it’s a string instrument. I knew how to hold a bow. [laughs] So, I was ushered into teaching beginning strings, beginning violin, and so forth. Well, I could play a scale, but I am not a violinist, and couldn’t—but, that was it. I was better than everybody else, so I ended up teaching violin.

Wilmot: How many other people were in the music department?

Wilson: At the time, there must have been, I would imagine, about twelve. Ten or twelve.

Wilmot: Were any of them also composers, or trained as composers?

Wilson: No. The department consisted primarily of instructors in instrumental instruction, some music theory. Now, there were three people who taught music theory at that time. There was a woman whose name was Mrs. Lee who had been there about thirty or forty years, who also was the wife of the vice president of the University. She had gone to Eastman School of Music and had focused on music theory, and was a good solid music theory teacher. There also were two other people. There was a man whose name was Lynn Bowden. Bowden had been associated with the naval bands in the Great Lakes, and specifically had been the director of the Black Naval bands during World War II. He was a composer and arranger, primarily arranger. He arranged for big bands, dance bands and so forth. But he also arranged for the marching bands. So, he was principal arranger of the marching band. The way the faculty was, when I said somewhat jokingly that Florida A&M stood for Athletics and Marching Band and football team, part of that was true in the sense that every other faculty member in the music department had a direct responsibility for the marching band. The marching band was a phenomenal marching band, and had developed unique techniques of marching real fast and was a really outstanding, entertaining, you know, a really unique band. They were really highly disciplined. Dr. Foster, who was the head of the department and the director of the band, was a good organizer. He had organized this band and recruited people, and he had a good band. What happened was that he hired—most of the other faculty members were men. There was a person who taught trumpet and maybe taught history of something, but he was assistant director of the band, and his main responsibility was all the trumpets of the band. [There was] another person who taught trombones, and he taught something else, but he taught private
lesson trombones, and he was responsible for all the trombones in the band. Another person taught saxophone, the whole thing.

Wilmot: So, this was a very different environment musically than where you had been trained?

Wilson: Absolutely! It was built around the band.

Wilmot: I understand. That’s clear to me now.

Wilson: Right. [laughter]

Wilmot: I have a question about your—when you describe when you are encountering and becoming familiar with an African American intellectual tradition, who were people or what were works from that tradition that really struck you? Were you particularly enjoying Langston Hughes? Or were you particularly enjoying someone like Zora Neale Hurston? Who, when you speak to that tradition, in particular?

Wilson: Well, what happened was that I was somewhat familiar with those works of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston and Claude McKay and [Jean] Toomer and people like that, before, just because of general reading, and I guess my own interests and so forth and other friends and that gang and kids that I knew, you know, things I knew as a kid. So, I was familiar with those people. What was really important here was connection with people, live people, some of whom knew those people, who knew some of the painters and the writers, and would talk about them. It was quite a time ago, but they would talk about them, or they had people who were intermediaries between them and the other person. So, it became not something that was in the past, but a living tradition. And, also, we would have a number of discussions about everything from politics to art and to everything else, and so it became an interesting, vital community of thinking people, who were also intensely involved in the arts. I hadn’t been exposed in that way to that, except among musicians. In St. Louis, I was exposed to that among musicians. Musicians, some of whom were very bright and very interesting and very politically aware and so forth, but that was different because they were all musicians. They weren’t—it wasn’t like this camaraderie between the writer and the painter and the choreographer and so forth. At Florida A&M I got some of that for the first time, and that I found very exhilarating.

Wilmot: Was tenure something that happened, were there tenure positions?

Wilson: Yes, there was tenure. But, then as of now, it’s usually after four or five years. So, I was only there two years. Then I go back to graduate school, and then I come back for a year. So, it really didn’t become an issue. Because after I got there the first year, I discovered that it was important for me not to stay at Florida A&M. I enjoyed the life there; I certainly enjoyed meeting particular
people who were bright and interesting and accomplished people, but I also knew that the way the music department was structured would not allow me to do what I wanted to do. Now, I was the only male in the music department who didn’t have a direct responsibility for the band. I was hired to teach music theory. So, I came and taught music theory, but—and the other person, the arranger for the band, also taught music theory. There was at least one time when he got ill, and I was asked to do an arrangement for the band, you know, and I did arrangements for the band, but I could see that this could develop into something I’d be expected to do. I didn’t want to do that; I didn’t want to do that because I was trying to write my own music.

As a matter of fact, I did write some music there. I don’t know—

Crawford: “Wry Fragments,” I think came from there.

Wilson: “Wry Fragments” came from that, but before that, I wrote a piece. “Wry Fragments” is interesting too. The poetry from “Wry Fragments” was written by a friend of mine, did I tell you about—?

Crawford: No, you didn’t tell us about that. Tell us.

Wilson: Okay, I have to tell you about that, that goes back to something. Anyway, I wrote a piece called—did I say something about “Dance Music One” or “Dance Music Two?” Is that in that list? Maybe I don’t even list it because I don’t—I probably don’t have the score.

Crawford: I have a pretty complete list of—“Dance Suite?” 1962.

Wilson: “Dance Suite.” Yes. That was when I came back to—.

Crawford: That was ’62.


Crawford: And, “Soliloquy in Bass.”

Wilmot: Then, “Dance Music for Wind Ensemble” is 1963, too.

Wilson: Right, okay. Well, what happened is that “Dance Suite” was a piece that I wrote for the dance ensemble there. There was a woman whose name was Beverly Hillsman, who ran the dance ensemble there. And, she was a very interesting person. She was from Detroit. And she had this excellent dance group, and so I wrote some music for her. And, it was really, really nice collaborating with her and writing the music and doing it, and getting it done, and you know, it was good. So, that was one of the things that happened as a result of connecting with other artists.
But in answer to your question, it wasn’t so much about specific pieces of work, although, clearly there were things—and obviously the conversation always comes up in these circles: the works of [Ralph] Ellison, the works of James Baldwin, you know, Richard Wright, Native Son, and Invisible Man, you know, the early works of Baldwin then, which we were reading. You know, then, we were talking about that and looking at what—the political relevance of what we were doing became issues that we explored and these kinds of things. So, these were all part of what we did.

Crawford: Was your music, at that time, in anyway centered on political activism? “Wry Fragments” doesn’t sound that way.

Wilson: No, not really. Not really. I think that begins to happen—wait a minute, I wrote a piece called “Biography,” ’61, ’62?

Crawford: That was later.

Wilson: How later, ’65?

Crawford: I have it at ’66. Based on the LeRoi Jones text.

Wilson: Okay, that was later.

Wilmot: Same year as “Piece for Four.”

Crawford: But you did speak about the responsibility, you felt the responsibility to reflect—

Wilson: Yes, at that point, you began to think, at least I began to think wider about what I was doing, and how I was doing it and why I was doing it. Up to that point, I think there was a tendency to think of the [W.E.B] Du Bois “concept of the double consciousness” where you are part of two different things, and it just becomes part of your life, and you sort of turn on this compartment, turn off that other compartment depending on where you and what you are dealing with, that kind of thing. But, unlike Du Bois’ model of these being warring factions, I’d never thought of them as being warring factions. I just thought of them as reality: you are part of a larger world, and you are part of a smaller world, and they both are important. There are different dynamics in those worlds. It’s the same ideas that I think immigrants from any place have, but there is a special situation of African Americans having been people who came here as slaves. So, that then adds a special dimension to it, and people are still discriminated against. So, you have that, but still, you move in the larger world.

Because, also, remember I was a part of a world that was rapidly changing; I mean the Jackie Robinson syndrome of ’47 was very important because behind that ideology, which was, I think, probably the prevailing ideology
right after the war, was “Okay, it’s a new world. The war is over; you have opportunities that you didn’t have before; we must take advantage of them.” But, in order to take advantage of them, you have to be, not only qualified, but super-qualified. You can’t be equal, you’ve got to be better. So, you better build up and be better than you can, otherwise you’ve got no chance. If you aren’t better, you might as well forget it. So, that was the prevailing view, and that was something that was drummed in from our parents over the years. “You’ve gotta be better, so you work hard at doing that,” and that became the idea. The idea of asking, “Why do I have to become better?” comes along later, but at that point, the prevailing thought was “Hey, you know, you’ve got an opportunity now; we know cards are stacked against you, but don’t sit and cry about that; toss down your buckets wherever you are, and be better.” That was kind of the prevailing philosophy.

Wilmot: How did that academic community in Florida or how did this group witness, or maybe I should ask how did you witness the growing Civil Rights movement that was happening?

Wilson: That was central. Everybody was deeply concerned. Remember we were all primarily young. Most of us were, most of my close friends were in their twenties and maybe a few in their thirties.

Wilmot: Who were your close friends?

Wilson: Well, close friends there, there was a person whose name was Harold Rose, who was a professor of Geography, who subsequently left there and worked for the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, and eventually became the president of the American Geographical Society. I remember him. This woman, Beverly Hillman, was a choreographer. There was a painter whose name was Louis, I think, who is still there, I forget his first name. There were several other musicians, but most of our personal—there was a couple called the Bairds; they both were administrators at the university. They were close personal friends. They had children our same age and so forth. These were all young, aspiring people, all of whom did interesting things. And then some of the older people like the Edmonds, who I mentioned who was—Randolph Edmonds had done research in African American theater, ran the theater on campus, had been associated with theater in New York, and was active as a young man—by then he was certainly probably in his sixties or something—but as a young man he had been active in the Harlem theater movements in the Harlem Renaissance and so forth. So, he was a key—and his wife was always very interesting, and was also in the theater, very striking and intelligent and dedicated. People like that were excellent role models and so forth. So, those were some of the kinds of people we were involved with at that time. And also, another person who was interesting there, I think we met him the second time we moved there, his name was Fred Humphries. He was in chemistry, and there is another man whose name is—what is his name?—he was in physics, I think he is dead now. But Fred Humphries was in
chemistry. He was originally from Florida, had gone to Florida A&M, had gone to University of Illinois and finished his graduate work, and then got involved—I know it was the second, when we were there the second time he had come down—he got involved in—no, he came to Florida A&M to teach. He ultimately became president of Florida A&M, and was president of Florida A&M for like fifteen years or something. He was a very good president at Florida and so forth. But, those were some of the people who were there, and we were all young and aspiring to do things and so forth. And, most of us realized, for us it was necessary for us to get out Florida A&M because it was an interesting place, but limited.

Crawford: Did most of you leave eventually? Did anybody stay?

Wilson: Most of them left. Of course, Edmonds didn’t, of course, and some of the older professors whose careers were there. But people who were aspiring to do other things left because the institution had difficulty in providing the kinds of things that one needed to pursue a real research life. For example, sabbaticals, you know, which you take for granted at some place like Berkeley, where every six years you got a year with either all or two thirds pay or part of the year or something like that, and you need that, a period like that to really get some substantive work done. That really didn’t exist at Florida A&M. I guess people refer to it more as a teaching institution. It is like the distinction between the Cal State system and the University system. Whereas the Cal State system the teaching load is higher, if you do some research fine, you know, but it is not expected of you. Whereas at a place like Berkeley, it really is “publish or perish,” or [creative perks?], I mean, that’s what you are about, and so if you don’t do it, you aren’t going to be there very long. But, on the other hand, the institution does have the kinds of resources to help, to support you in that area.

So, I understood that “Hey, look, if I want to get from A to B, this is not the place to be. It is great to be here for certain aspects of things, certainly the social life is exciting,” but not only the social life, as I said, the special relationship of working and being a part of the black intellectual tradition, and being aware of that. Then, the other thing was the idea of working with young black students was really important, you know. But I began to look at the long run as, you know, “How much music can I will I be able to write, and if I do write it, where will I get it performed?” So, I knew it was important to get a graduate degree and then move to another situation.

But, even though I was only at Florida A&M for three years, it was extremely important at that point in my development, and it shaped my approach to things. So, there are certain things that I will always retain having had that experience from the fact that first trip there, to the fact of understanding the complexity of the situation. On one hand, this is the heart of segregation, and on the other hand, you have some black people living like kings. And that was kind of hard to face and hard to deal with. You know, when I tell my parents
and friends, they still don’t—I don’t think they still believe that. They said, “Oh. You are just saying that, you know, just to justify your decision.” I said, “No, it’s true!” And, it is one of those things that happened as a consequence of that. I mean segregation was a terrible thing, and I have always abhorred that and always will. But if you look at some of the good things that happened, not because of segregation, but things that reflect the transcendence of the spirit and the transcendence of the wish to improve one’s state that happened in spite of it. So that you have people who have made tremendous contributions in spite of that.

And the other thing is that you always had a community. A lot of sociologists, [William Julius] Wilson and a lot of others pointed this out—that in those segregated days in the community, unlike what exists in the lower class situation in the most abject inner city communities there, where there is nobody to aspire to; the only role models are the pimps and the prostitutes, and the guys are maybe now-a-days some lucky rapper who raps and raps and suddenly he is a millionaire and so forth. But, you know, in my days, in those days, even though the neighborhoods themselves were not wealthy, everybody lived in the same neighborhood. So up the street was doctor Jones or somebody, you know, in a house that was a nicer house than most other people’s house, but he lived in the neighborhood, people knew who he was, went to the same churches, went to the same schools. You could aspire to that. As a boy scout, going through some merit badges, you’d have to go to the doctors to do your medical Boy Scout merit badge, or you would have to go see somebody over here about this, and there was somebody in the community who understood these things and who was not far removed from you, who was a part of the community. So you could say, “Ah ha, if I work hard I can go from A to B, and it’s not somewhere a thousand miles away; it’s right here.” And there was pride in the community too. There were problems in the community, but there was pride in the community, especially when I was young, when it was a very solid kind of community.

But, even after I left, and after things began to deteriorate, the older people still had that same sense of pride, and so you had that. Then, later on, when you started getting to the second and third generation of people who were totally nihilistic and who are dealing with a totally different dynamic, who didn’t have the experience of having parents or grandmothers and neighbors who were watching you and trying to support you, as opposed to everybody out there trying to get something for themselves and dealing with the problems they had to deal with. So, it makes a very, very different kind of world.

Wilmot: I have a few questions for you because I know we are about leave Florida A&M and I know we are going to go to University of Iowa very soon. The first question is, I asked you a question about how did you witness the growing Civil Rights Movement, and I interrupted you, and I wanted to give you room to answer that question. And then the second question is how did
you stay connected to those composer circles and networks that you had kind of already established through your graduate work?

Wilson: The first question is that in Florida A&M, the idea with this group, this small coterie of people, our friends, we all were very supportive of the civil rights movement. Matter of fact, I discovered, after I got there, that the person whose job I took had been fired because he was the advisor for a group of students who I think ad hoc decided to go down and sit-in some place. So, when that happened, and it was revealed in the paper that there was a black professor at Florida A&M that was working with this CORE group or whatever it was that sat-in at this place, he was fired.

Wilmot: What was his name?

Wilson: I can’t even remember his name. I have forgotten his name, I will find out. But he was fired, and I didn’t discover that until I got there, and so I was going wow, you know, this is really pretty bad. Now, informally, you know, a lot of us supported these kinds of things, gave advice to the students who did that. We, ourselves, didn’t participate at Florida A&M. Prior to getting to Florida I had participated in St. Louis, you know, and in other places. But being aware of this, and supporting, and contributing and doing that kind of stuff we did. Writing letters, you know, writing letters about this and that I think we did. Then, when I went back to Iowa, things were developing and then we got even more involved, and then we came back, and then I went to Oberlin. Now, when I was at Oberlin, I was very much involved because first place, there were only two black faculty members at Oberlin at the time. And I was young and the other guy was—I was late twenties by then, and married, family, and therefore, had a house and we would invite students over.

This was really during a very traumatic experience because the whole process of the civil rights movement was really heavy. The arguments between, on the one hand Malcolm X, and the other hand Roy Wilkins, you know, how far do you go? The arguments that sometimes were posed between the assimilationists and the nationalists, were very much a part of the debates that were going on all the time. So, it was very, very complex. And also this is the center of the black cultural movement, you know, when most of the communities are beginning to identify with the civil rights struggle and being reflected in the clothes and everything, the big afros and all of that stuff. I mean, that’s very much a part of [it], and I was still young enough and involved enough and very much a part of that. So, I became the faculty advisor for the black student union.

Wilmot: This was at Oberlin?

Wilson: At Oberlin. And, principal person involved in helping put together the black studies program at Oberlin.
This sounds like a frivolous question. How did you dress?

How did I dress?

How did you dress at that time?

My clothes were pretty much—I usually wore a shirt and tie, a sport coat, shirt and tie to school. I had a lot of hair. Had a lot of hair—I mean, hair was a big thing in the sixties, I mean, you know, hair was it. That’s why you could take one look at someone: “Are they a long hair, or are they a short hair?” What you wore really didn’t make that much difference.

You are saying hair did make a difference?

I am saying the hair. Oh, I mean, what you wore didn’t make much of a difference, but in those days, as an African American, if you had a big Afro and if you wore a suit and tie, people would see the big afro, they wouldn’t see the suit and tie. It was later on in the sixties when everybody got loose, so much so—and still today—that very few professors, every day, wear a shirt and tie. As a matter of fact, it is very few. Although, I like to wear a shirt and tie! So, sometimes I had to wear them and sometimes I wouldn’t. I mean, sometimes I would wear a sport coat, just without a shirt and tie. A lot of times I would have a shirt and tie. Often a turtleneck and a jacket, you know, without the tie. Sometimes, if I felt like wearing a tie, I would wear it. If I felt like wearing just a short sleeve shirt, I would wear that too, because by that time, certainly by the seventies, you can wear anything at Berkeley. I mean, you have everything from some people with suits on and some people in whatever, you know, so you didn’t—but in the sixties, the hair was more of a marker. You know, whether it was long hair or short hair or whatever. That sort of told you some things.

When you mentioned, when you said, you know, it was a very traumatic situ—that one has definitely stopped [referring to recording instrument], when you were describing how-

—along the Underground Railroad. So, it had this whole abolitionist kind of tradition there, in Oberlin. So, in 1835, they opened it up, and women were the first—they were the first university in the United States that was not a single sex university, that admitted women. In 1833, they did the remarkable thing of admitting African Americans, which was extraordinary in 1833. I mean, slavery is still going on, taking slaves to college, but that was because it was part of the slave run, and this was part of the free part, this was part of the Yankee part, had nothing to do with Yankees, but it was the northern part, and also because it is relatively close to Canada. So, you can go up to Oberlin, and there is Lake Erie right
here, and if you keep going on Lake Erie, you get over to Detroit, you
know, it’s close. You go right across the water and there you are in
Canada to freedom.

Crawford: But, they didn’t have black faculty. You were the second black faculty, first in
the conservatory.

Wilson: Oh no, oh no. That’s the irony of the liberal tradition. [laughter] That is you
have, you know, people who were very supportive, many, but there had never
been—well, there was a black faculty member in—at least one when I got
there. He was in math, and had been there. His name was Wade Ellis, and he
had been there for years, and he was an excellent math professor and so forth.
But, to my knowledge, and I think I am correct about this, there had never
been a black faculty member in the conservatory, until I came. And then, we
were able to organize black students.

But the reasons why the black students got organized was also interesting. It
didn’t all have to do with the political situation. There are some important
social dynamics that had to do with that. That was very interesting too. So, if I
get invited—they want me to come back, you know, and if I can come back, if
I have the time to go back, I’d like to tell the truth about the whole thing about
what happened. What really happened is that—and it’s a little bit after five,
but let me finish this story.

See you’ve made me start talking, and I go off on these tangents.

Wilmot: No, this isn’t a tangent.

Crawford: Very, very interesting.

Wilson: What happened, traditionally, Oberlin, as I said, admitted black students in
1833. The conservatory therefore, which is another division of the college,
always had admitted talented black musicians, too. So, you have that long
history of black musicians going there. Clarence Cameron White, who was a
composer; Nathaniel Debt, who was a composer; William Grant Still, who
was a composer. William Grant Still only went there for a short time.

Crawford: I had no idea.

Wilson: They all went to Oberlin. And many other people, you know, George Walker
went to Oberlin, his sister, Frances Walker, went to Oberlin. It was an
outstanding place, you know, in the Julliard like category, but in the turn of
the late nineteenth century, in the turn of the century, would admit blacks if
they were talented enough. So, you had this history. Oberlin also admitted,
you know, in other fields. So, it was one of the places where the Du Bois’
Talented Tenth would go. If their family could afford it, or even if they
couldn’t afford it, if they were bright enough and they did well, you know,
there were scholarships. So, there always was a black presence, small, but
always a black presence at Oberlin. Usually, I imagine, two or three percent, but one to three percent over a long period of time. There was a bump, a spike in that thing that happened in the sixties, you know, when suddenly large numbers, and not only the Talented Tenth from well to do black families. Traditionally, the talented tenth from well-to-do black families, okay, second, third generation college people. Some of these places that taught at places like Florida A&M who had bright kids. Even though they grew up in Florida, the kids are bright, the kids are doing well, that was the place that they would go. If they could get into some place like Harvard, or they would get into Oberlin or someplace like that.

So, there was that history, but what happened in the sixties was that, some of us there, and there were only a handful of people, said, “It’s great to serve the talented tenth, but the talented tenth are going to have a good chance at getting almost anywhere they want to go in this climate. And there are a lot of other people who are in the inner cities who are very bright, and who could do very well at Oberlin, but don’t fit your usual profile, and don’t have the money, you know. If we had the money,” and Oberlin has a good endowment, “and if we are really committed,” and at the time, the then administration at Oberlin was committed. And there were people like me jumping up and down said, “We really ought to do this, we could lead the country, you know, Oberlin, talking about your tradition, let’s do it, you know, let’s do it!” Fine. So, you know, we had a critical mass of people who supported this, and we were able to get it going. So, we admitted more students into Oberlin, some of whom would never have been there. Not because they weren’t bright enough, but because they didn’t fit the other profile. They probably either couldn’t afford it, or maybe their schools were not the elite schools, either from the black communities or the integrated community.

So, there were people—I tell you, a couple of people you know, have you ever heard of, oh god, what’s his name? An actor, I can see his face. He was in, used to be on television, Avery Brooks. You ever heard of the name Avery Brooks? Avery Brooks was a student there, at Oberlin, at that time. Avery didn’t come from a wealthy family, family was okay, but it wasn’t wealthy, but he probably wouldn’t have been there had it not been this sort of special push. And, he was a very talented actor, even then. He also was a singer. And what he did after graduating from Oberlin, he went to graduate school in drama. He began to act in a lot of different venues, both on the legitimate stage and then he got involved in television. What was the name of that? There was a television show that he used to be on. He used to wear dark glasses and—this was in the seventies. Well, you would know the name of it, I can’t remember the name of it.

Crawford: We didn’t have TV in the seventies, can you believe it?

Wilson: [Laughs] Yeah, you were wise. Anyway, he’s the kind of guy, he has been on a lot of different television shows and the legitimate stage. He did a one-man
show about Paul Robeson. He went around the country and he sang, you know, Robeson. And he was in the Malcolm X opera. He sang in that. He is probably on something now, you know. Couple other actors that went there. You know Robert Guillaume? Okay.

Wilmot: Uh hm. He became Benson.

Wilson: Benson, yeah, Benson. You know, Guillaume is not his real name. His real name is Robert Williams.

Crawford: If I could make up a name, it would be Guillaume. [laughter]

Wilson: Yeah, Guillaume, Robert Guillaume. You know, I saw him on television and I said, “Wait a minute, that guy looks familiar.” Turns out, he had been a student at Washington University when I was there. He was older but he had come back—because there were a lot of veterans in those days that had been in the Korean War—and he came back, and he was interested in opera. You know, he was a good actor. His voice was okay, but he didn’t have a beautiful instrument, he just didn’t have a beautiful one. But he was a great actor, and he had a few roles, because this was a small opera company and so forth. Then, I think he left and next time I see him twenty years and he got his big break on something before Benson, it was on something else, and then he became Benson, so now he is all over the place. He was an interesting guy.

Wilmot: Olly, I think we should maybe stop for today.

Crawford: Let’s stop for today.

Wilmot: What we did is we kind of took the Civil Rights thread straight to Oberlin and we missed talking about your time at the University of Iowa so—

Crawford: We will pick up on that.

Wilmot: I will need to go back and listen and ask more questions about what was going on in Oberlin. Who you were working with to make change happen? What made you feel safe to take on that kind of change, being someone with a family at this place? Those kinds of questions I am really interested in.

Wilson: Those are all interesting questions. I won’t try to answer that now. But part of it is the time. I mean, I knew people indirectly who were killed, really—the term struggle is not is not just—but who were actually killed doing this, and disappeared, and the police. And then you hear about the COINTELPRO. That’s why the stuff that’s going on now is really scary, just to jump to now. This Home stuff, [Department of Homeland Security, Patriot Act], where people are just apparently gleefully giving up their civil rights in the name of security. It seems to me that is more like a vendetta that [President George W.] Bush has against [Saddam] Hussein.
Crawford: Do you know, I’m a Green, I’ve been a registered Green for about ten years. And we are considered subversives now! They are stopping us from traveling. People are just giving it all away!

Wilson: People are just giving it away!

[End of Interview 3]
Interview 4: December 12, 2002

Wilmot: Okay, shall we begin? Interview number four, Olly Wilson, December 12th, Caroline Crawford and Nadine Wilmot. Let’s see, today we wanted to begin with asking you about your dissertation at the University of Iowa.

Wilson: Okay, my dissertation was a piece for orchestra called—“Three Movements for Orchestra.” And it was a large orchestra piece, and probably the longest orchestra piece I had written up to that date. As most dissertations, you know, I was trying a lot of different things and new challenges and influenced a great deal by the kind of music I had been hearing, but trying to shape it, give it my imprimatur. It was a long piece, and when one is working on a dissertation, I have always taken the attitude that this is your chance to write a magnum opus or else you don’t know at that point in your career whether you are ever going to have the opportunity to spend that much time on a single piece, and write it for a large piece with the greatest of optimism that it will be picked up and played by somebody.

At the University of Iowa, at the time, there was a practice of playing or at least not necessarily performing, but at least reading, at least one movement of the dissertation and most of the dissertations then were large orchestral works. So, this was this large orchestral work, and I did have a reading schedule, and so I thought, “Well, this is my opportunity to really get that done because to have an orchestral work done by a major orchestra at that point when you are just finishing your graduate degree—“

Crawford: This was Dallas?

Wilson: Well, subsequently Dallas, but I did it at the University of Iowa, and the University of Iowa University Orchestra did a reading of a movement. So, I worked very hard on it, and I did have the movement and it was read, and I was pleased, you know. A reading is always difficult because, on one hand you can get a semblance of the piece, but it is a reading. And in this case it was reading by a good but student orchestra which meant that if you were trying something very difficult, and this was very difficult because, you know, as graduate students are wont to do, you say, “Well, I can do anything I want,” so you go out there with a lot of bluster. But, then when it comes to reading it, and it’s literally a reading, and people haven’t had time to practice it or work out the difficulties and you are asking the performers to do some very, very difficult things, the reading is always on one hand exhilarating because you are hearing, literally hearing, not only in your inner ear, but in real space and real time a specific piece. And you know what it is in your head, you know what you imagine it to be, but the reality is that you get a semblance of that, and there are so many things that aren’t exactly perfectly performed that you know it’s perfectly not performed and so do they, but their idea is to give you a semblance of it. So, it was exciting on one hand, on the other hand
disappointing because you would really have—it would have been great if the New York Philharmonic or some major symphony were performing it.

So, that was the piece. The piece itself, it’s so long ago to even remember what I was attempting to do, except that I wanted to write an extended piece, which was conversant with contemporary techniques, which also reflected my—some basic ideas, the idea, and all around music—I wanted to be communicative, I wanted to be able to communicate something to the listeners, and I thought, though it was essentially an atonal piece that I managed to do that because my view of atonality is that it—even though it is atonal, it wasn’t necessarily completely atonal. There were large sections of it that were atonal; there were other sections that were not atonal. And the idea of flowing from one to the other has always been a logical kind of thing. When I say tonal, I don’t necessarily mean tonal in a functional tonal sense, but tonal in the sense that there were places where you clearly hear a dominant tonal center, a principle tonal center, maybe a pedal point or something like that, but there is a principal tonal center, and that then sets up a kind of expectation about what happens around it. But I am consciously moving in and out of atonality and tonality. So, I was even doing it back then.

That piece was written in 1964, yes, because that’s when I finished the dissertation, 1963, ’64. Took me about a year to write it, but I was very pleased with the piece and very happy with what happened. Normally, dissertations often are read and that’s it, you know. Often, many people have written dissertations that they have never even had read, so I was fortunate to have it read, but I was even more fortunate a year or so later, when it was read again by a New Music festival, sponsored by the Dallas Symphony Orchestra. It was an open competition and I submitted the score and it was chosen to be read. The idea was that reading music by young composers. So, I submitted the piece, and they said, “Okay, we are going to read the piece,” and invited me to come out to Dallas. So, I went out to Dallas and heard a reading of the piece, and it was a very good reading. I mean, the difference between a professional orchestra and a student orchestra is really tremendous.

Crawford: And Gunther Schuller picked the piece?

Wilson: Gunther Schuller was the guest composer, and I think he may have picked the piece, too.

Crawford: He conducted it?

Wilson: He conducted—I can’t remember, no I don’t think Gunther conducted the piece, I think whoever was the conductor there conducted it. But, Gunther was a guest composer there, and I think Gunther had chosen, I think Gunther probably was responsible or he was working with a committee that had chosen the piece. Probably he worked with the conductor or something. So, the piece was chosen.
There were about four or five pieces done, and it was an open public reading, and it was an outreach program that the Dallas Symphony Orchestra did. Outreach in the sense that they wanted to create a forum for music by young composers, and also a forum that promoted new music, you know, because a lot of people have difficulty relating to new music, and somebody came up with the idea of having a festival in which they brought in a guest composer, perform his music, and then talk about new music, and then bring some young composers out and do a reading of their music. And so that was the context in which this was done. So, you know, I was very pleased. I did get another performance of that piece, and at least another reading of that piece, and you know, that was fine. I think, since that time, there may have been maybe another. I don’t ever remember a real performance of that piece, but there may have been another reading somewhere else because often, in those days, this was the middle sixties now, one of the things that was going on in the country, a number of different orchestras would have a festival of contemporary music in which they would read the music and sometimes perform the music of young composers. So, I was part of that. I was around, and a young composer at that time, and so was able to benefit from that opportunity.

Wilmot: Was this the first time that you had worked with Gunther Schuller, or heard of him?

Wilson: I had heard of him, of course, because he was very well known by that time. It was the first time I had met him. Let’s see, yes, this was the first time I met him because this was 1964. I subsequently was invited to Tanglewood in 1970 and I was commissioned to do a piece there. Gunther was responsible for the festival of new music there, and I am sure that he was the person that ultimately made the final decision on who was going to be commissioned. And, having heard my piece before, I am sure he had something to do with my being commissioned to do a piece. Then I went to Tanglewood, and then we had a real performance of this new piece, and Gunther conducted that, and since that time, I have known him, and we have been colleagues and friends and so forth. As a matter of fact, in certain ways, Gunther has helped to mentor my career because of his stature and so forth. So, he’s—

Crawford: He’s had tremendous impact hasn’t he in many fields. He’s really a polymath.

Wilson: Oh yes. Yes, he really is an extraordinary person. Part of the reason also was because he had a real great interest in jazz, and I do too. So, we had a common interest there, and the other thing is that he is a champion of contemporary music and a champion of young composers. Just as he supported me, he supported many other young composers and created opportunity, helped to create opportunities for one’s music to be performed.

Crawford: And you said that you don’t think much of third stream music, which was a focus of his?
Wilson: Yeah, I don’t think much of the manifestation of third stream music. I think the manifestation of third stream music is, what I have seen—much that is labeled third stream music, essentially became a juxtaposition of music which was jazz, and music which was a frame, contemporary frame. Often you would hear, the way the piece would work is that you would get a frame which would sort of create the context in which it was going to be performed, and then you would get some improvising musicians perform jazz, and then you have another frame, the orchestral frame. I always thought that was a juxtaposition, it wasn’t integral to the basic structure of music. On the other hand, there are pieces that are very, very interesting pieces that take elements of jazz and it becomes a natural part of the piece. Gunther’s own music, for example, his Klee studies, for example—this is a perfect example—that is, it’s an orchestral suite and it’s based on his reaction to certain visual phenomena, certain art work, and one of them is a clay piece called “Little Blue Devil,” and what he does is use that title and play sort of a reaction or response to the whole idea of blues or jazz, and then Gunther writes a piece which gives his reaction to the work. So, in that work he uses jazz elements, but they are very much integrated in the whole framework of what he does, you know. So, that’s an example of something that works very well. Now, there’s two, but, you know, even going back to the twenties, I mean, other pieces that aren’t jazz, but strongly influenced by jazz, a whole genre of that kind of music from the twenties, and much of it disappointing, but one of the ones that I think, that is very successful in that regard is [Darius] Milhaud’s “Creation of the World.” That work is good because what Milhaud does is take elements and then combine them in a meaningful way in his basic conception of the piece. So, it works, you know. It’s not jazz, but it is clearly influenced by jazz, and that’s much more successful.

Crawford: How do you evaluate Schuller’s works because he has written operas, he has written for jazz companies—

Wilson: He has written on a wide range of things. Well, you know—

Crawford: His importance to contemporary music.

Wilson: Oh yes, I think Schuller’s important to contemporary music on a number of different levels. One level is as, I think, just an extraordinary champion of contemporary music as a conductor, as a publisher, as a person who is an articulate spokesman for contemporary music, and who’s used his positions either as head of the Festival of New Music at Tanglewood or as the President of the New England Conservatory, his position as a member of a number of different boards and foundations to really articulate responsibilities of the foundations—the musical establishment to support music of our time. So, that’s one thing. And as a composer also, I think, a series of his works, you know, his string quartets, I think his first piece that was very successful was something called Symphony for Brass and then “The Klee Studies” is probably the most well-known piece. Then, you know, a number of pieces
after. I mean, he’s been a consistent, productive and effective composer for, what, fifty years or so.

Crawford: Were you instrumental in getting him onto the Players board, or was he there when you joined?

Wilson: Let’s see, when I got on the board—I don’t think I was directly involved in that—

Crawford: I guess he was there earlier, wasn’t he?

Wilson: You know I can’t really remember. He may have—he had done something with the San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, but I don’t know if he was on the board then, and he—I don’t know exactly when he became on the board, but as you know, his involvement on the board has been essentially honorary. [Schuller is currently on the SFCMP Advisory Council] You know—

Crawford: Yes. So, you haven’t consulted him when you have done programming and that sort of thing?

Wilson: Not, not on a regular basis. I mean, from time to time—I mean, he’s a personal friend so I have talked to him about things from time to time, and this might come up. I might ask him, “Have you heard of this,” or he might ask me, “What’s going on? Any extraordinary pieces out there or something.” So, I mean, we have had that kind of communication, but not on a regular basis. It’s just been musicians talking music, you know, “What do you like about this? Or have you heard Charlie Brown’s work?” or whatever.

Crawford: Let me ask just one more question about the dissertation before moving on to Oberlin. That is, when you write a piece that is atonal and tonal, and it’s played and then, can the audience pick up your aesthetic, or if they don’t, does that bother you?

Wilson: Well, there are two questions. Let me answer the first one. I think that most people would have difficulty articulating clearly the distinction between tonality and atonality. They would—a more sophisticated musician, of course, would hear that and say, “Ah ha, that’s atonal or this is atonal,” but there is such a continuum between that, which is rigidly atonal and that which is really tonal because most—much music goes somewhere, slides easily between that. Most people, well, they might say, “This music sounds dissonant, or this music sounds weird or whatever.”

Crawford: That’s what I mean really. The vocabulary doesn’t matter, but I wonder if they get to be on the same level with your thinking?
Wilson: Well, what I hope is that when a person hears a piece, the piece will communicate something meaningful to them, independent of what they think about the techniques used, you know. In that they say, “Wow, that was arresting, or that was striking, or that really made me think in a certain way, or I never thought about what this piece suggested about something that was perhaps tonal or something that was perhaps atonal.” So, I hope that the piece comes across as a sonic experience that is meaningful to the person, and independent of whether it is tonal or atonal. So, that’s what my desire is. From hearing people respond to my music, I think, what I consider the best pieces usually communicate. That is, there does seem to be a correlation to me between what I think—there are a few exceptions—but there does seem to be a correlation between what I think is good, and what the audience response is. Not always directly proportional, I mean not always the same, but usually, because there are pieces or sections of pieces that I think are really good, of my own. And sometimes there’s a reaction to it and I assess the reaction as consistent with what I think it ought to be. Other times, I am not sure peoples’ reaction is what I anticipated it would be.

Crawford: That’s what I am getting at here. I remember reading or talking to Bill [Blacken?], you know Bill Blacken of the Sacramento Bee, who I think is a very good writer, about Sinfonia, I think, and he said it perfectly. I thought his description of the music was as exactly as I thought probably you would agree with that, but that must be rare.

Wilson: Yeah, well, you know, there are so many critics it depends. It’s usually an astute critic will at least hit on something that I think is right, but let’s face it, I mean, critics come in all different kinds of things from people who are just there because it’s a gig, you know, it’s a job, and they’re just there and they are a writer or they’ve got this little part time thing to do it and they are trying to say something and they don’t really know what to say, and it becomes really impaired. Then, there are people who are very insightful and have very good ears and listen very carefully, and have studied the piece before, and they find out something about you, they find out something about the piece. They might even go to rehearsals, you know, and then sometimes they can come up with some very interesting things, sometimes even citing things that you didn’t quite hear that way, but you think it’s a valid kind of approach, criticism or statement about the piece. So, it’s really very wide ranging. I like it, of course, and you feel really, really good about the fact that somebody has been able to listen carefully to something that you have created and find an aspect of it that makes sense and carries forth through the piece that you hadn’t thought about in that way, and they thought that was important enough to write about it, and to really articulate and really express it very, very meaningfully. So, those kinds of things happen, and then you also get other people who totally misconstrue what you are doing. And the whole question about expectations—sometimes, if you name a piece certain things, I mean titles mean different things. Sometimes people go and they have a preconceived image of what the title of the piece is supposed to be, and when
they go to hear that, if it’s not that, then they are disappointed or their preconceived notions about what you are supposed to be doing as a composer, or what you, individually, they read about you and say or they see you and they say, “Well, you are supposed to do X and Y, and it’s—but this music doesn’t sound like X and Y.” So, then they go, “Well, what is going on?” you know. So, there’s a lot of different range of expressions and reactions to it.

Wilmot: How does your family like your work, your sisters and—?

Wilson: That’s interesting, that’s a very good question, very interesting question. I don’t really think, to be perfectly honest, that my sisters, my sisters particularly understand my work, really. Not really. I think that they appreciate it. They are my sisters, and it’s like, you’re a sister, “That’s my brother, I am supporting it in that sense,” on that level. But, I suspect if you talk to my sisters, they probably can name maybe one or two pieces of mine, probably not. They remember the piece that was done, they came to a performance, maybe the St. Louis symphony did it cause that’s their home town, or they came somewhere else that they heard, or maybe I sent a recording or something, and they remember that. But, now having said that, then I have to back up because I want to be fair to them, too. A lot depends on what the piece is. Music, like anything else, the ability to understand and communicate and get something out of it varies, if it’s a multi-layered kind of text, whether you are talking about art, music, dance or whatever, there are so many different levels of meaning, and you’ve got to bring to the table certain perspectives and certain degree of understanding about this so that you are, as you sort of get involved in listening and assessing the meaning of the piece. If you haven’t done that, then you listen to it, and it’s immediate reaction. Now, there are certain pieces that grab you, whether you did that at all. You might hate them or love them. I think a piece like Stravinsky’s “Rite of Spring,” for example, whether you know anything about contemporary music, you hear that and it’s so arresting because it’s even, you know, almost one hundred years later. The piece is so arresting that, for many people, there is going to be some reaction. “What is that? That’s crazy? This is ‘primitive’ music” or whatever, and some people are excited about it, and some people aren’t, but many people—something like that. I have heard excepts of it in other contexts, and hence bring sort of associative interpretations to it.

In the case of the pieces that I write, it depends on what the piece is. For example, one of the pieces I’ve done, that I feel very good about, is a piece called “Sometimes,” which is for tenor and electronic sound. It’s based on the spiritual, “Sometimes I feel like a Motherless Child.” Now, if you know the spiritual, if you know anything about the spiritual and you hear that piece—the piece is set in the context of a tenor singing in a kind of an abstract way, and yet the tenor also moves freely from clear statements of the spiritual in a modal way, “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child.” So, if you hear that spiritual, you recognize that spiritual, and it’s clearly the spiritual, but the context is so fractured. It’s the electronic music that is interacting with the
tenor. They are sharing the same kind of soundscape, and yet you get part a little of the literal spiritual and you are getting something else. Simultaneous that you get the spiritual, you are getting the commentary to the spiritual. So, you are getting both the statement, the narrative if you will, and a commentary on the narrative in that a twentieth century, late twentieth century commentary on this ancient text, you know. And that text has meaning just because of the text, so you have all of this richness, you know, that you have there, and people relate to it in different ways. Now, in that particular piece, that was a real challenge for me, and I am really happy about that piece because, what it enabled me to do was to connect, in a very very meaningful way, with something of my heritage, which is very, very, always very, very, powerful to me. But, to reinterpret that, and give it a post-civil-rights-movement sort of context, which at the same time reaffirms the essence of the early spiritual, and the whole idea of transcending whatever limitations that life places on you, which I think is one of the major thrusts of the spiritual anyway, and at the same time, bringing in ideas which clearly could only have existed in the end of the twentieth century.

So, you are looking at something, oh, you are reflecting on that, and you are giving it a contemporary statement, you know, and that multi-dimensionality of it makes it extremely—it was extremely exciting to me as I did it, but as all artists, when you are doing that, I don’t think I would have articulated just as I articulated at the time. I was writing a piece, and I was writing a piece for tenor and electronic sound, and that meant there were certain kinds of decisions that had to be made. For example, if you have a tenor singing as a voice on the tape, then whose voice is it going to be? Is it going to be the person who ultimately does it, and if that person does a performance, does that preclude anybody else from doing it? And, if you have other people doing it, then there are different qualities. So, what does that suggest about the nature of the quality of the voice? On the other hand, if you work in the electronic media, the very nature of the media enables you to modify, to modulate, to reframe whatever that exists in real time. So, you have something in real time, and you can multiply and detract and create a whole number of different levels of it.

It’s like the Romare Bearden [gestures to painting], you know, I mean, it’s like in the art world, you’ve got different dimensions, and one of them is the cubist, and people being discovered from looking at art from other parts of the world, so called “primitive art” is that if you look at an object and the object is showing you different dimensions at the same time, it gives you a broader view of the object, you know, and that’s one of the great discoveries of Picasso and the cubists. And, that existed in certain cultures, traditional art anyway, before the cubists began to do it. Now, if you look at that idea, and you think about that in terms of music, whether you are conscious of it or not, that’s one of the things that adds another dimension to it, and that’s one of the kinds of things I was doing. Absent the kinds of developments that happened in electronic music prior to the time I got involved, I don’t think I probably
would have thought of it that way, I don’t know. I mean, it’s hard to know where your ideas come from, but—and I don’t think, as I said, because when I started writing the piece I would have articulated what I did, just as I did now because that’s looking at it and thinking about it much later. What I would have thought about is writing a piece that was reflecting me, where I am now, and where I am now is a person who has also internalized all these other ideas that are floating around as part of common usage of artists. And yet you want to put your own touch on it, your own perspective on it, so that’s interesting.

Crawford: Well, thank you. Well, let’s move on to Oberlin, next stop, and find out from you how you got there.

Wilson: Hmm. Okay, I had finished the PhD in 1964. Shortly after that, and actually this line of questioning, judge and jury, is a good one because it does paint a picture. I did the dissertation. I think we talked before about going to Florida, you know, I got the job at Florida A&M, and then when I was teaching at Florida A&M, I got this letter. No, I heard about this festival at Dallas so I submitted the Ph.D. piece and the piece was chosen. And that was, it was a great success. I was very pleased because now a professional orchestra was going to do a reading of a piece of mine. So, I go out to Dallas and I hear the piece. And once that happened, then other opportunities began to occur, and I began to have other opportunities.

Now, remember, I returned to Florida A&M, and when I finished—well, my first sojourn in Florida A&M was in 1960, which we discussed last time. Stayed there for two years, and then I went back to the University of Iowa to graduate school because I realized I needed to be in a different milieu. At the University of Iowa, I stayed there and I expected at the end of that time—this was now 1964, by the time I am finished with the dissertation—that I am going to move somewhere else because I realized that although Florida A&M was exciting in some respects, in many respects, it was not the place that really nurtured a composer doing the kind of things I wanted to do. So, I was looking for other territory, and I applied and applied and applied for other jobs. Unfortunately, I wasn’t able to get any other jobs. As a matter of fact, I wasn’t able to get any other interviews. In those days, there still were photographs that you submitted in letters of application. I can’t remember career placement offices, which are sort of standard now. I don’t think we had a career placement office. I think what I did, was to take—[interruption, as Wilson’s furnace turns on and he turns it off]

Wilmot: Olly, I had one question for you, which is about, in looking for work, and I understand, you know, you are talking about discrimination, or just when you are talking about photos and images. What I was trying to understand was if perhaps members of your dissertation committee were at all—you know how people have networks that sometimes help people, you know, move from one place to another? In fact, I think that is one of the primary ways that people find opportunities.
Wilson: It used to be called the old boy network.

Wilmot: Yeah, was the dissertation committee at all helpful? Who was that on your dissertation committee, and were they—?

Wilson: Yes, that’s what I am getting to because that happened to me too. What happened was in those early days you write letters and so forth, and you send out unsolicited letters wherever there was a university, hundreds of them, and you usually get a letter back saying “Sorry, we don’t have anything,” and occasionally somebody would say, “Well, we might have something.” But the fact of the matter is that I didn’t get any position; I didn’t even get any interviews. As a matter a fact—wait, let me get to the story, I will talk about this aside, later on.

So, I went back to Florida A&M, and I taught at Florida A&M for another year. Now, while I was there, I got a call from a person who was on my dissertation committee, and a person who was supportive of me at the university. His name was Professor Tom Turner. My principal composition teacher at the University of Iowa was Philip Bezanson [spells]. He was a very supportive individual and was my teacher. As a matter of fact, I ended up being his last student at the University of Iowa because after I graduated, he was appointed dean of the University of Massachusetts School of Music and so, he was responsible for developing this new school of music at that campus. University of Massachusetts, Amherst, which was a new campus of the University of Massachusetts. As a matter of fact, it was his first dean, and then he died shortly after he had finished most of that work there. There is a hall named Bezanson Hall so it was named after him. Anyway, he was a teacher, he was a very supportive person, and there is an interesting story about why I think he was supportive. Did we talk about this somewhere? Did you read it somewhere?

Wilmot: No, I would like to hear about it.

Wilson: Okay, but let me finish the first line. The first line is that Bezanson was the chair of the committee, but there was another professor on the committee whose name was Thomas Turner. Bezanson has now gone to Massachusetts, Turner is still at Iowa. Turner was the chair of the theory department. At that time, composition and theory were part of one and the same. Most composers taught music theory and so forth. Theory as a separate discipline, though it existed, was really the exception, rather than the rule. So, we were being trained as, educated to be composers, but also to be teachers of theory, music theory, and of course harmony, you know, all the aspects of music that have to do with the theoretical side, the cognitive side, including orchestration, including analysis and that kind of thing. So, that was a province of people in that area. So, I knew Turner, and Turner, as I said, was the chair of the Music Theory department, such as it was, but Turner himself was a composer. He had been supportive of me all the time, and when I had returned to Florida
A&M I got a call from him saying that he heard about a position at Oberlin, and that he was going to recommend me for it, and would I be interested? I said, “Of course, I would be interested!” Because he knew that I would prefer not to be in Oberlin, not because of—

Wilmot: Not to be at A&M, Florida.

Wilson: Yeah, not to be at Florida A&M because the responsibilities didn’t allow me enough time to be able to work. So, he recommended me for Oberlin, and I applied for the position, and surprise, surprise, surprise, I got the position. So, that was a major, major thing.

Now, the other thing that’s in answer to your question, the other thing that I wanted to say about Bezanson is that, one of the reasons that I went to the University of Iowa was because—I had applied to a number of different places. I think I have mentioned, I applied to Stanford and so forth and several other places. I did get accepted to Stanford, but there was no money and I couldn’t afford to go with my wife and kid with no money. I couldn’t borrow that much money. Stanford was really expensive back there then. But, at the University of Iowa, I not only got an appointment, I got a scholarship, and I got a teaching assistantship in the first year. Now, that was unusual because often, people don’t get to be a teaching assistant until the second year of graduate school. I mean, at Berkeley even today, a person comes in the first year and they aren’t given a teaching position until after the first year because it takes about a year to adjust to graduate school. Well, in those days, Iowa did. It had a large undergraduate set of responsibilities, and they needed people, you know, to do that. So, I had a teaching job when I got there.

When I got there, the teaching responsibilities were pretty arduous. I mean, it was a lot of busy work. There was a person who I was assigned to work with, you know, to be his assistant. This person who had a rather quantitative approach to music theory, and which required an endless amount of exams and guess who had to grade all those papers. Well, it was a lot to do, and it’s great with computers, but it was mindless stuff, you know, like write scales, major scales, and do major scales in each key and you have to do so many in a minute, let’s see how many you can write. So, you start on B, write all the majors, you start on B flat, you start on C double flat or whatever, and it was just, you know, once you understand the concept you understand the concept, but it then became something to see how fast you could do it because this guy believed in quantitative kind of analysis of everything, and it was really silly, frankly. I thought it was silly then, and I think it’s silly now. And, it took a lot of time because these were large theory classes that enrolled about one hundred people, and then all those papers that I had to go through, just go through the way a computer scanner could do easily. And that's what they should have had, rather than somebody sitting at a desk, trying to look and say, “Oh, this person has written in E and it should have been E flat.” So, it took a lot of time, and it was interfering with my other responsibilities—
Wilmot: Did Bezanson rescue you?

Wilson: Bezanson didn’t because I did not talk to Bezanson, but I did talk to Tom Turner, and Tom Turner was the head of the theory department, this other person worked in the theory department—so Turner said, “No, you are only supposed to work twenty hours, and if it gets more than twenty hours a week then you come to see me and we will work it out.” So, apparently, he talked to the other person, and so the workload became more reasonable.

So, I had established a bond with Tom Turner, and he was the one who told me about the Oberlin position, and I applied for the Oberlin position and got the Oberlin position.

Now, let me go back to Bezanson. Bezanson, this is important, when I went to University of Iowa, I subsequently discovered—I didn’t know this at the time, I just applied there, I needed to go to a place that also would give me some money and I could have a job and I could also get a scholarship. Iowa fulfilled that need. Now, when I got there, I discovered that there had been several other black composers who had gone to the University of Iowa and had completed their PhD. I was going, “My, this is interesting.” As a matter of fact, when I was there, there was at least one who was there when I was there who had been there before I was.

Wilmot: Who was that?

Wilson: His name Fred Tillis, and Fred Tillis subsequently, had come from—I guess it was Kentucky State or some place like that and he had studied there, and then he went back to the South to teach like I did. He taught at Grambling [State] University for a while, and then eventually he got a job teaching somewhere else, and eventually he taught at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst when Bezanson was still there and eventually became chair of the department. So, anyway, but Fred was between five and ten years older than I was and he had been teaching and so forth. Then, I began to talk to Fred, and he knew about other blacks that had been at the University of Iowa. So, then I began to go “Well, wait a minute, you know, I wonder how that happens because usually its one or two in a generation or something, but not—.” We really are talking about one or two in a generation, but if you compare that with almost any other place, it wouldn’t have been but maybe one or two in a couple of decades.

Wilmot: So, there was something going on here.

Wilson: So, I was saying, “What’s going on here? What’s the common thing?” And then, then I began to reflect on it and then I got to know Bezanson quite well. So, I started talking to him about his background because the common thing was Bezanson. Bezanson, being head of the composition department, he really gave people of African American descent a really good look, you know, and
as I got to know him more—I knew he was a Yankee from Massachusetts, you know, but I didn’t know the full story. As I got to know him well, I found out that he was from New England; his first piano teacher was black. There’s a history in New England, particularly Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and parts of Connecticut of having black music masters. It goes back to the colonial period. As I later subsequently became very interested in the history of African American music, and there were black music masters in New England from the 18th century. It turned out that Bezanson’s first piano teacher was a black musician. One of these, you know, still continuing in that long tradition of a very properly trained, black music teacher. So, as far as he was concerned, race was not an indicator of what you knew about music or didn’t know. As a matter of fact, if anything, it may have been positive because he had had positive experiences with African American musicians. It turned out that this person happened to be the father of a person who ultimately was a famous choral director at Howard University. His name was Werner Lawson. Werner Lawson was a relatively famous choral conductor and head of the music department at Howard University at Washington, D.C. His father was an excellent pianist and musician who had taught in the small town of Massachusetts where Bezanson was from originally. So, it was that old history-like connection—

Wilmot: That’s kind of an amazing network and also it is so interesting how before African American people had access to certain opportunities, how if you were talented and gifted and trained, where you found work.

Wilson: Exactly, exactly. Often, there was a sympathetic mentor. Somebody who had the authority and really gave you a careful look. Now, that was to get in. Now, once you got in, then of course you have good and bad. You have some people who thought you shouldn’t have been there in the first place and did everything to make it difficult for you, and you had people like Bezanson who were supportive, and then most people were somewhere in-between, you know, indifferent or mildly supportive or positively supportive. So, you had the entire gamut, you know, which sort of balanced out. But the biggest thing was getting the opportunity.

And that’s why you find you have a similar story at the major institutions where people of color went for higher education and especially at the graduate level. For example, there are about two schools that most peoples of African American descent from the middle of the nineteenth century went to study music. Oberlin was one of them. I think we might have talked about that. And graduate schools, most of the major graduate schools—and this is later on, but we are talking about middle twentieth century when there were more African Americans who began to work towards advanced degrees. In that context, most of the institutions that they attended were in the Midwest. Places like the University of Michigan, University of Iowa are among them, New England Conservatory is another one, but New England Conservatory didn’t give graduate degrees beyond a master’s degree. So, PhDs of blacks in music, for
the period of 1950 up until the last twenty years of the twentieth century, up to 1980, the majority of them came from the University of Michigan because it’s a big school. It’s Midwestern and there were some connections over the years, University of Indiana in certain fields, in performance for example. The opera singers, the pianists, the violinists, University of Indiana, not many composers. Composers, University of Iowa. Now, there were occasionally others who happened to come from wherever, you know, they happened to be wherever, but those institutions were where people of that generation who were in graduate school went, and in every case there was some connection, there was a person who really was a strong mentor and so forth and was really supportive.

It’s an interesting observation and then if you look at it historically, it’s because of certain patterns that have happened, even sometimes in the colonial period. So, it’s really fascinating to look at education. That’s a book that needs to be written somewhere, sometime.

Wilmot: Well, there’s this whole theory around like social capital being part of who you know, and how that tends to break down around race in this country given the history of discrimination and racism here.

Wilson: Exactly.

Wilmot: When you went to Oberlin, can you kind of just place for me, what was the environment on campus? What were people thinking about? What was going on? What did you encounter when you came there?

Wilson: Now, remember I came to Oberlin in 1965. Okay, 1965, the beginning of the great social change in race consciousness. Certainly, the sixties and all that suggested both in terms of the international affairs of the United States and certainly in terms of the civil rights movement, the black cultural movement and so on. All this happens within that period and I am right in the middle of it in Oberlin. The manifestations of that was that first, the institution itself had a history of being a liberal institution. As I think we mentioned before, Oberlin was the first school to admit women in 1832 and then to admit blacks in 1833. So, it had this long history of being a liberal place, and as I said also, it’s an undergraduate place where most of the major black composers, performers and anything, on the undergraduate level had gone to Oberlin or aspired to go to Oberlin. So, Oberlin had a liberal predisposition and it was right in the middle of this.

The first aspects of it had to do with ROTC and recruiting. In the year of 1964 it had to do with ROTC and recruiting on campus. Remember that almost every university and college had an ROTC, and Navy recruiter, Army recruiters or Air Force recruiters would come on campus. As a matter of fact, I was in the Air Force ROTC at Washington University in that it was
obligatory, I mean, you had to be. From 1950, right before the—let’s see, the
Korean War was over when?

Crawford: 1952 wasn’t it?

Wilson: ’51, ’52, something like that. So, I was in college from ’55 to ’59, so the
Korean War was still, I guess it may have still have been going on or
certainly, the occupation of Korea was still going on. I mean, there are still
American troops in Korea. But in 1957 you had Sputnik. Then, when Sputnik
happened, the Russians got the first satellite up. That meant that the United
States really went into an all alert because they think, “We are losing the
scientific war. We should be the cutting edge of technology, and now our
nemesis, the Soviet Union, has beat us in space, so we have got to work
faster.” So, all of that starts a whole series of things. The ramifications of that
to a young student in college in ’57 was the following story.

In the middle fifties, if you are in a college and you are male, you have to be
in the ROTC. It’s obligatory because the military draft was also obligatory.
So, every male expected to serve time in the army, one way or another. So,
faced with that, I, like most people my age thought, “Okay, you are going to
have to go in the Army. Is it better to be a foot soldier or is it better to be an
officer?” Of course it is better to be an officer because if you are an officer
you make more money right? Although there are some problems of being an
officer because if you are an officer, the first level of the officers in the Army
are second lieutenants. The second lieutenants were supposed to lead their
troops into battle, and the mortality rate of second lieutenants was higher than
almost anybody else, so that was the other side of the ROTC bit. So, you
thought about that and then you start thinking, “Well, let’s see, but that’s not
the only service. What about the Air Force and the Navy?” Well, the Navy, I
don’t really like water that much and so what about the Air Force? Well, I
never really thought about flying, but it might be a lot of fun. So, I said okay,
and besides, I like the uniform, they’re blue, they’re cool—so, I opted to be in
the Air Force ROTC. So, we were in the Air Force ROTC. And because I was
a musician, and because this is Washington University—and I already
mentioned that Washington University had been a segregated school. The
Supreme Court decision happened in March of that year. In the fall of that
year, Washington University said, “Okay, we will comply with the Supreme
Court.” So, they admitted the first blacks. I was a student the next year, and
that “first blacks” meant, two blacks out of seven thousand students. And then
the next year I went as a freshman, and I think there were, I can’t remember,
ten to seventeen. So, I was in the vanguard of that group, and so we went to
Washington University. Now, we are in ROTC.

Since most of the blacks who were students at Washington University had
been sort of hand-picked from high schools there because the recruiters came
to our high school, talked about Sumner High School, and talked to our
advisor who was John Buckner, who was really a marvelous mentor. They
recommended people who they thought would work out as part of the Jackie Robinson Syndrome. “Who’s going to make it? Who’s going to keep their cool? Who can handle this, and blah, blah, blah?” That kind of thing. And, who’s got the kind of discipline and so forth to be able to handle whatever they have to handle? So, I was among the students recommended, and I wanted to go there anyway because a couple of years before they had started the Saturday music theory programs. I think I have mentioned that—

Crawford: You did.

Wilson: So, I had gone there and I had liked it. So, anyway, I go to Washington University. Well, I am in the ROTC because you have to be in the ROTC, but we joined the Air Force ROTC because the uniforms were cool, and they look like real uniforms, so I would be on the bus and people would say, “Oh, this guy is in the Air Force,” but it doesn’t look like the average undergraduate’s cadet uniform. That’s really flashy and so forth. Every Monday we had drills. So, all the blacks, all four of us, you know, in our ROTC decided, “Okay, since we have to do this, hey lets have some fun.” They had the drum and bugle corps. “Let’s get in the drum and bugle corps.” So, we all applied for the drum and bugle corps. Now, several of us had been in the band, you know, so we knew about marching and all that in high schools. Also, the guy who was a year ahead of us had just been appointed—who also was black, he was one of the blacks who had come a year ahead of us, one of the two who had come a year ahead of us. He was also in the ROTC, and so somebody said, “Why don’t you make this guy,” his name was Jacob Adams, “Why don’t you make him the head of the drum and bugle corps?” All the other blacks who were there, decided to be in the drum and bugle corps.

Now, what was significant about this was that in the mornings, and there were about one thousand kids, one thousand ROTC people doing these drills in these little regiments and whatever, but it was all led by the band. The band was unique. Everybody had on blue, but the band was really spiffy. We had on our regular military black shoes, but we had white spats, we had white gloves, we had white helmets, and we had the drums and bugles. And of course, we were making up special music, little special hip little drum beats. Because nobody else could read music well but me, I would write the stuff down. You know, I would say, “Oh, let’s try this,” then we would do it, and I would write it down because I said, “What did they do before?” “Well, we did,” whoever was there, and you know, the majority of people were obviously white, and they said, “Well, we did this.” I said, “Yeah, but did anybody write it out?” No, nobody knew how to write, they just passed it on by rote. I said, “Well we should write that down.” So, I started writing down all the beats and we started making up some others. It also was a kind of a spectacle because everybody knew there weren’t many blacks, but of the blacks, here we all drumming and leading the Air Force ROTC because we liked the uniforms and we liked this little flashy stuff.
Now, because of that, because I wrote these things out, I got an award in my sophomore years as “Most Outstanding Sophomore Cadet” in the Air Force ROTC. That was 1957. In that spring of 1957, Sputnik had occurred and so—which was before Sputnik when this happened. When you’re a sophomore, you go for your advanced—to determine whether you are going to get into the advanced corps, which is really serious business. So, I really didn’t want to go into the Army, and I really didn’t covet being a pilot, but I figured that would be better than being a second lieutenant, so I said, “I better take this.” So, I did that. There was intellectual stuff, I did fine on that, and then there was a physical. We had to go over to an Air Force base, Scott Air Force Base in Illinois. So, I went to Scott Air Force base. At the time, I guess the other guys who were black, who were sophomores decided they didn’t want to go into the Air Force. So I was the only one who went. I went over, and I did all the physical stuff you had to do. It wasn’t that much, and I had never had any physical problems; I had never been sick a day in my life except for colds and stuff.

Anyway, I got the results, and the results said, “This candidate does not qualify, he washes out for quote, “a mild degree of flat feet.” I said, “Flat feet? I never had any problems with flat feet, what is this?” Now flat feet is significant. Flat feet used to be symbolic of blacks. People used to say, “All blacks have flat feet,” you know, it was again one of those myths—and I say, “Wait a minute. What is this?” because I was surprised and a little shocked because after I had passed the intellectual part I thought, “You know, I am going to be in the Air Force.” Now, once you got in the advanced corps, the Air Force paid the rest of your tuition. Now, you have to promise them three or four years of your life, but they paid the rest and I thought “Well heck, that’s fine.” I was on a scholarship and I was—but I was working gigs and other stuff to make up the difference and so forth. So, this business of the advanced corps had a practical impact on my life right then because that meant that I wouldn’t have to worry about the money because with the money the Air Force gave me, and the money I was already getting for my four-year half tuition scholarship, I would have been home free. But I didn’t get in. So, I was really upset about that because I had never had flat feet, and it was clear that—remember that blacks had only been in that school for like three years then, and there had never been a black in advanced corps and Missouri is a borderline place. I think I told you about the segregationist fraternities that were there and so forth. So, it was really a problem, and I am sure that was an example of racism in institutions. They just said, “Okay, we don’t want—

Crawford: Sounds like it, doesn’t it?

Wilson: Yeah, so I didn’t get in. But then Sputnik hit, and this is why I mention this. I have a good friend who is Frank Greene, whose name I told you who was also in school. Frank was a year behind me. Frank also was in the drum and bugle corps. So, I went through first and I didn’t get in. Frank went in the next year, and Frank got in the advanced corps. I said, “Well, Frank, what happened to
you?” because Frank did have a mild degree of flat feet. [Laughter] I said, “Did they examine you?” He said, “No, they didn’t even examine my feet.” So, I said, “What happened?” So, I was trying to figure out what happened. Well, there were two things that happened. First place, I was a major in music; Frank was a major in engineering. Secondly, I think more importantly, it was after ’57, and after ’57 the whole everything, you know, it’s like post nineteen-eleven when everybody think, “We gotta do this, we gotta do that.” That was kind of that era and people were saying, “You know, first we need all the scientific expertise we have. We don’t care where it comes from.” Also, if you think about it, there was an explosion of people from all over the world going into the sciences, engineering particularly, engineering and science areas, in the United States. It was because of the idea, “We need the best brains that we can get, and so the hell with all this other stuff.” So, Frank Greene gets in, ultimately goes to the graduate school, ultimately goes into the Air Force. He didn’t become a pilot, I think—actually, what they did is pay him to go to graduate school, and he worked in the government in a number of different capacities, but mostly just doing research in engineering. He graduated and he eventually came out to California in Silicon Valley, like all the other engineers, and got involved in the ground floor of the computer world and has done very well in life.

Crawford: But, you never got in?

Wilson: No, I never got in the advanced corps.

Crawford: There was no appeal for that?

Wilson: No, because you either wash out, you wash out. So, I was washed out so I did—

Wilmot: You went home and looked at your feet.

Wilson: Actually, I was upset because it was clear, I considered it blatant racism, but as I thought more about it, I really didn’t want to go and spend three years of my life in the service and so forth.

Crawford: You know, I am wrong about Korea because I have friends who were in Korea and it went way past ’52. It started in ’52. [The Korean war lasted from June 1950 until July 1953.] But was there a question that you would have gone into combat?

Wilson: Well, not at that point because I didn’t graduate until ’59, and it was over. But it’s possible that I could have been sent to Korea or I could have—because there was still occupation. What probably would have happened if I had gone—and we look at Frank’s career. Because he was in engineering he went to graduate school, and then he worked in research in the service. He was in the service, but he was really doing sort of research in the service and that sort
of furthered his career, but also furthered the goal of what the military wanted at that time. So, in my case, being not in a scientific field, I could have been in the music field, you know, the military had music stuff too. So, I could have, and probably would have been in the Air Force band or in the Air Force something like that.

Wilmot: Olly, can you bring us back to ROTC in Oberlin?

[phone interruption]

Wilson: Back at Oberlin. Oberlin, as I said, was a very liberally disposed school. Sort of a general pacifist kind of orientation historically. So, a lot of the students were concerned about the fact that the Vietnam War was starting, and the Vietnam War was going on then in the middle of 1965, very much so. And there was an anti-war movement there and this sentiment was being reflected by students harassing other students who were taking or saying they wanted to take ROTC. They felt that in a school like this, which was a private school anyway, and had a long history of being pacifist, or if not pacifist close to it, that there shouldn’t be complicity with a government that’s mounting what they considered to be an unjust war, and which has never been voted upon or was not like World War II or anything like—it was Vietnam with all of its complexities. So, the student’s reaction was, “Let’s form a protest,” and the form of the protest meant, “Let’s create obstacles for the Navy recruiters” when the Navy recruiters came. So, when the Navy recruiters came, the students would do things, try to stand at the door to prevent them from coming. And then, went to the most extreme case, and this is one of the first cases that this happened. A group of students knew the Navy was coming in, so maybe fifty, sixty students surrounded the car of the Navy recruiters and in effect prevented the Navy recruiters from getting out of the car. So, this, of course, got great publicity, national publicity, and so you may have heard about it—you didn’t hear about it, you are too young [chuckles]—but this kind of thing happened. It was one of the first instances of anti-war campus protest.

Wilmot: And this is while you were at Oberlin?

Wilson: This happened right before I came. So, in 1964, which is about the same time as the free speech movement here; this was the kind of flavor that happened. So, once that happened, then, you know, a number of students became very much involved. Another thing that was going on at Oberlin was that, at the same time, there was the beginning of—the civil rights movement was going on, and there were the freedom rides and Oberlin was a place where people recruited students to participate in that. So, there were students and faculty members and other people who from time to time would participate in freedom rides. So, Oberlin was identified as another place that supported the freedom rides and so forth. So, because of that, the tenor of the campus was, “We should be doing something, you know, it shouldn’t be business as usual.
We have a responsibility to try to make the nation live up to the ideals of the constitution.” So, that’s the kind of environment in which I lived.

Wilmot: What was your activity like on Oberlin’s campus around those issues?

Wilson: Okay. Well, when I first came there, remember I was the first black person ever appointed to the conservatory, and the only black person in the conservatory at the time. There was only one other black faculty member, whose name was Wade Ellis, he was in the math department, and had been there about twenty years. But I was young. I mean I was under thirty, and I finished the degree and I was twenty-six years old when I finished the PhD, and then I taught at Florida A&M one more year. So, I was twenty-eight years old during my first year at Oberlin.

[interview interruption while recording media are exchanged]

Wilson: Okay, now, basically because of I guess who I was, where I was, and my age and so forth, but more importantly, I think, my basic sentiments were certainly in concert with the basic sentiments of most of the students that Oberlin, as a university, as a college with its history of being supportive of major social change in this country, should be actively involved in the major movements of forced social change and justice that were going on in the middle sixties. And that took a number of different forms. I mean, we articulated that in a number of different ways, but the way my personal involvement was most clearly articulated beyond statements that I would make or interviews and this kind of thing really had to do with the establishment of African American studies at Oberlin, and the creation of the Black Student Union. I am trying to remember the specific name, but that’s essentially what it was. As one of two black faculty members there, and one that was young, it made sense to do that, and also as one that had a family. Dawn, my daughter was born then, and we had a house. Kids who lived in the dorm liked to come over to somebody’s house from time to time, you know, for dinner or something like that, and more often—the way it started initially, and the way I met a lot of those students was first, we needed babysitters, so we called the dorm and you would get different people to baby-sit, black and white and whatever. There were very few Asians at Oberlin at the time, but we were particularly interested in some of the black kids because we wondered where they came from, who their parents were, that kind of thing. So, we got to know several of the students. We got to meet a lot of the students, and became fairly close to them. So, they would tell us, and then, as a result, we became sort of little counselors to them, unofficial counselors. If somebody had a problem, or they felt that somebody wasn’t treating them right, or maybe they were having academic difficulty, or just the angst that goes along with being a student away in college for the first time in your life, and feeling alienated and the need to have a family of people who share some of your values. So, we became that.

Wilmot: Your household really played that role?
Wilson: Well, as I think about it, it wasn’t the kind of situation where students were always coming in and out because they weren’t. It’s just that occasionally. For example, every graduation, we would have a reception at our house and people would come over, and there were certain students who were closer friends, babysitters or people who were students of mine in one way or another, and they would come over. But, it wasn’t like they were coming over all the time, but we were identified as a family who was supportive of the students. Then, when the Black Student Union started, I was asked by the students to serve as the faculty advisor to them. There are advantages of being an interest group because it could get a minimal budget, it could get access to rooms, it could apply for support from the Student Union in general. So, I became the faculty advisor for them, and in that context, one of the first things we talked about was studies in African American culture. So, then I became very much involved in a committee to first look at that entire issue, and ultimately to develop Black Studies at Oberlin.

Wilmot: Who did you work with? Actually, I should narrow that question. Who did you work with around that agenda? Around the Black Studies department?

Wilson: Around the Black Studies Department. Several different people. First, the first thing that we did was to look around and say, “Look, I am the only black faculty member in the conservatory, there is another black faculty member in the college, we need more people that these students can identify with. Because I am also a young man, I’ve got kids, I am writing music, you know, I can’t become the major counselor;” it just didn’t work. What we need to do is have other people who really are counselors. And there were counseling kind of services, and kids would go to the counseling service and come back with horror stories about suffering from this problem, or that problem. They’re frustrated and stressed out and they go to see a counselor and the counselor doesn’t understand what they are talking about and they feel alienated, you know, the whole syndrome. So, one of the things we did was to say, “We ought to bring in some counselors who can really counsel these kids.” So, we were able then to get some counselors, some black counselors, and to get other administrators there.

The institution as an institution was interested in expanding the number of student who were of color in the college, and it had had a long history of having the “Talented Tenth” kids, but they also said, “Look, we should be interested in not only the kids who happen to be in the talented tenth, but kids who are bright kids, but don’t necessarily come from upper-middle class or middle class black families, but come from the ghetto, come from the center, and really are making a big leap.” So, then there were groups of faculty members who worked together to do that, the result of which over time meant that first we brought in counselors who could meet the needs of the growing number of black students, we increased the number of the percentage of black students, and we increased the profile of it, we changed the profile of black kids. In addition to the talented tenth, there were other kids who were bright
and could make it academically, but didn’t have the resources, and came from the inner-city.

And that was a new kind of trend because Oberlin had black students for many years, but didn’t have students from that kind of profile. So, as a result, with these students come baggage and so forth, and there are different kinds—that means you need more counselors, you know, and then you also need—some of the kids who the rigor of the academic preparation was not like the talented tenth kids’ background was, so then you had to work, “To what degree do we have support for these students so they can make it?” And of course, at a certain point you can only do so much. If they don’t make it, they’re gone, but the point is, you ought to create the opportunity. That’s what happened.

Now that goes over several years, but in the course of which, we developed a sense of the culture of the college. That this is an important responsibility that an institution like Oberlin should be involved in.

Wilmot: Was the institution warm towards these changes? Did it facilitate these changes or was it kind of hostile? Or was it reluctant?

Wilson: The institution was receptive. Well, not—receptive in a range. Receptive in general. It doesn’t mean that everything we came up with, everybody said, “That’s a great idea.” It meant that some people were more receptive than others, but in general, if you look at the tenor of the times, the institution was receptive because the institution was also very proud of its history of being liberal and in the vanguard of social change. So, it was predisposed to be liberal, but it also had some difficulties, some individuals had difficulty with this kind of change. For example, the conservatory was always much more conservative than the college was, and that’s because conservatories, like any specialty schools, are focused on what they do. Musicians, “I am playing the violin, I am playing the piano, what is all this stuff? I am not prejudiced, you know, so why are you dealing with this?” And, “Why aren’t you practicing? What are you doing demonstrating?” You know. Some of the kids would come back and the teacher would say, “I saw that demonstration last weekend. You were out there, and you should have been practicing your violin.” Students were saying, “Well, does this mean that as a musician I am not supposed to be involved in anything else?”

All of these things happened, and so we had to try to sensitize the faculty and so forth. And there were different degrees. Some people never, some people just ideologically just hated the whole thing, and said, “I’ll be status quo. Don’t push. You are trying to go too fast, you shouldn’t change.” There were other people who said, “Well, this is reverse racism,” even. You would hear parts of that and you had a whole range of the spectrum of—and then the reactions to it—. But the most important thing is that ultimately, I would have to describe Oberlin, from the context of the social sensibilities of 1965 to 1970, as being generally receptive.
In the course of which, we developed a black studies program. Now, what happened, first—

Wilmot: Can I ask one question? Were there people you remember being, particular people you remember being champions, or people who you really—?

Wilson: Yes, there were always champions. There were people for whom usually there was something in their personal history which made them more predisposed for this. For example, one of the people that I remember was one of the few faculty members who was Asian, I am trying to remember his name, I can see his face, and he was in sociology, you know the field. I think he was originally from Hawaii, you know, and I think he was Japanese. The history of the Japanese in Hawaii is also a complicated one as you probably know. So, he had experienced discrimination of one form or another in his own life, both in Hawaii and in the United States. Maybe that’s one of the reasons why he was a sociologist anyway. He was positively disposed toward that.

Wilmot: Any key people in the administration that you want to mention that were really key in moving things forward?

Wilson: The administration—not at that time. I mean, they were not adverse to it. They were not actively fighting it, it’s just that they needed convincing. The president at that time was a decent person, I am trying to remember his name right now, but he was not a great champion of this, but he wasn’t a great adversary either. He was just, you know, he was just there. I mean, once a cogent argument was made to him, and he could see that it made sense, consistent with Oberlin’s history, then he went along with it. Carr, his name was Robert Carr. People considered Carr to be rather stiff. He was a rather stiff person, you know, he was a decent person, but he was stiff, and he was not on the cutting edge of what was going on socially, but he was sensitive enough to not become an obstruction. He could have been an obstruction. There were other people’s names, I can’t remember all of them. But the core group were a group of faculty, and it happened to be the one black and the one Asian, and then there were whites clearly involved in this, otherwise it wouldn’t have happened. So, we had a core group of people who worked at that.

As we first moved to develop more counselors, there were several specific people who were involved. There was a person by the name of Bill Davis, who was from East St. Louis—well no, Davis was from Akron, Ohio, but he had worked in a higher education program in East St. Louis. It was part of a program of Southern Illinois University in Evansville. There was something that had been established around the early 1960s called “The Experiment in Higher Education.” The idea was to bring in kids from the inner city, and to introduce them to essentially the great books, essentially critical thinking, essentially developing skills, reading, writing, and quantitative skills, so that people would become more viable candidates to survive in an intense higher
education program. This was a model program that had started. So, Bill Davis, who was also a young person, Bill was maybe a couple years younger than me at the time, he came to be an advisor to the administration and also, I guess not so much the administration, his essential role was counselor, particularly for African American students, but he dealt with all students as well.

Wilmot: When did he come?

Wilson: I came in ’65, he must have come around ’67. And then, after that, Bill and I worked a lot together, and he was in the house all the time because, you know, we are about the same age, we were developing strategy, how to deal with this and how to deal with that. One of the kinds of things that we thought was, “We ought to build the faculty, the first part of the faculty, in this emerging program because anytime you talk about any idea, it takes two, three, four years to develop.” So, in developing that proposal we thought, “What we ought to start with is the creative arts.” I know you’re in the creative arts, and there were a lot of students who were very talented either as actors or performers of one sort or another. So, we thought, “Okay,” and because Bill came from the Experiment In Higher Education, he knew a couple of really interesting people who were in the arts. So, one of the persons was a poet. His name was Eugene Redmond, and then another person was a painter, whose name was Oliver Jackson. They both, by the way, moved to California about the same time that I did, and both have continued their work as poets and painters. As a matter of fact, Oliver lives in Oakland.

So, around this group of people who began to present courses dealing with black culture from a number of different points of view, out of this group of people, which at first, just added courses in and so forth. I then started at Oberlin, the first course in African American music. So, we had a course in African American music, we had a course in African American literature, and we had a course in African American art. These were courses just added on in the respective departments.

Crawford: What was the focus, Olly, of African American music?

Wilson: The whole course was a survey, was a general one-year course. Well, it started out a one-semester course, and then it had to be expanded to a year. The idea was the introduction to the study of African and African American music. That is, what is it, which asks the question: “What is the nature of the music? Are there specific aspects of the music which are definable, and demonstrable? What is the history of it? Where does it come from? How has music of African Americans been manifested in the United States? What’s its history both in the written tradition, and in the oral tradition? How does it impact on the larger society?” So, you know, it’s a really large topic, but from the context of 1964, when nothing like this was ever explored in the curriculum, people began to—obviously people said, “That’s of course, a value statement. That means the music is not worth studying and so forth.”
Crawford: Did you know of other courses? Did Yale have a course? Did Stanford have a course?

Wilson: Well, a little bit around the same time. Actually, a little bit later, it was about—see, it’s the sixties, that’s when it all happened. I mean, the late sixties, about the same time. I think my course started at Oberlin probably around ’67 because I was there at least a couple years before we got it. So, I think I started it around ’67. Yale had a course that started, I don’t know when it started, probably about the same time, I think a little bit later, which was taught by a bass player who played with—what’s his name? I wish I could remember his name, I have forgotten his name. Anyway, he was a very strong jazz bass player, and he came, I guess, originally to give some general lectures, but then he sort of stuck, you know, he sort of gave this course and it really turned out to be quite good, and it introduced a lot of concepts, a lot of ideas, and made me think about music in a way. The whole thrust of this was to let people understand something about the culture, the traditions, and of course you can’t talk of music outside of dealing with larger cultural issues, and introducing that in a systematic way was really new. In retrospect, it was pretty revolutionary.

About the time I went to Oberlin, I began to realize, “Wait a minute, you know, as we start talking about culture and the lack of this and the manifestation of the Invisible Man syndrome”—I had gone through higher education in the United States. I had never taken any course in anything that had to do anything with African Americans, and I probably had never even asked myself, maybe thought a little bit about it. I knew the tradition existed. I participated in the tradition, but I was not—it was not part of the province of academia, and I really asked myself, your own awareness, well, “Why not? Why isn’t this part of the process of academia?” It certainly has a viable tradition, an important tradition, and it certainly has impacted positively on the fabric of American culture and it should be something that we consider, but it wasn’t being considered. Then I said, “Well, but you’re an insider now.” I mean, “You are in the university, you are now a faculty member at one of the best colleges in the United States, and so you can no longer then stand out and point fingers, you have to do something about it.” And anybody—I mean, Oberlin is an innovative college, all faculty members are always encouraged at most institutions to come up with innovative and relevant courses. So, I came up with an innovative and relevant course.

Crawford: This was for the conservatory?

Wilson: This was for the conservatory. No, it was in the conservatory because I was in the conservatory, but students inside or outside the conservatory could take it. It was designed for the general student. I realized that was very important because in the conservatory—and I also realized that it wasn’t just designed for black students, it was for black students who wanted to find out something about their culture, but it was for all students who wanted to find out
something about American culture. So, that meant that about that time or actually, it started just a little bit before, but I really got serious about finding out more about it myself because I had to go and read things. There weren’t, you know, it’s not like today where there are published books and so forth, you had to do a lot of the basic research. That’s how I got involved in the research wing of it, by necessity because you couldn’t pick up Music Dictionary and read anything then.

Now, just as I began to develop this awareness and do it, there were other people like me in other parts of the country that were doing the same thing, discovering, “Oh, gee, we should be teaching a course on African American music. You are African American, you have personal experience with this music, plus you know the tradition, you know the canon that’s there, you should really use the forum that you have at a university to really begin to do this.” And so, over a period of time, people would write each other and there were a couple of conferences that occurred. The most important was one in 1967, I think, at Indiana University somebody put it together, and that’s the first time I met Eileen Southern who was subsequently became the author of a book, *The Music of Black Americans*, which has become the standard text on studies of African American music.

Crawford: Olly, would black composers have been given good representation in terms of studies within the conservatory?

Wilson: Not really, no. Not really in terms of studies. Well, in the first place, remember the idea of the conservatory, the American conservatory, is based on an American adaptation of a European model. Just as the canon is based on the European giants.

Crawford: I just thought Oberlin might have been different, having you on the faculty?

Wilson: No, not really. Now remember, I am twenty-six, twenty-seven years old.

Crawford: I know, and you are brand new and green.

Wilson: I am just brand new; I am less than thirty years old. I mean, I’m there and sort of odd, because I am the first black there, and—when I’ve got a large Afro hair, and the Afro starts getting longer and bigger, you know, and so I am sure some people looked at me as being from outer space, you know. But the orientation—this is really, that really was important—the orientation of the conservatory was based on the European model, not only European models, but a nineteenth-century European model and so forth. And so all of the music, the composers that were studied, music history stopped about 1900 and that’s it. In 1960, if you finish the end of the romantic period, maybe at the last couple of lectures you might say something about Stravinsky or Copland or something, but American music, in general—never.
Crawford: How old was Dugger at that point?

Wilson: Ed Dugger? Ed Dugger was—Ed is two years younger than I.

Crawford: Oh, okay. He didn’t make a difference at that point?

Wilson: No, he was—I mean, remember we are all young. You know, when you are new, you do what you are told, I mean, you come and you teach, and we were teaching music theory, harmony and ear training, you know, harmony and ear training and occasionally you could do that.

Crawford: Was there an old lion on the faculty, like [Roger] Sessions?

Wilson: Oh yeah, there were a lot of them. I mean, Richard Hoffman who was Ed Dugger’s teacher was there. Richard Hoffman was the nephew of [Arnold] Schoenberg. Richard Hoffman was very much a Viennese man, I mean, he still is. So, he’s—I like Hoffman. I was back at Oberlin, I think I mentioned. I was back in Oberlin, I guess, about a month or so ago, and saw Hoffman. Hoffman is still his sort of bittersweet self, but his reality is a totally different reality. He is dealing with the impact of Schoenberg.

Crawford: But you might have guessed that he would have pushed Schoenberg and the Viennese School?

Wilson: Yeah, clearly. I mean clearly the fact that he had such an intimate connection to the Schoenberg School meant that people who wanted to know about that really could sit at the foot of Richard Hoffman, and learn—because here is a guy who had first-hand knowledge. But in terms of American composers in general, I mean, there were not any—nobody was a champion of American music at that time. I mean, people were hard put to even try to define it except a big statement of American music meant kind of an aspect of Copland’s career, “Appalachian Spring,” that sort of popular styling, not the “Variations for Piano” or the music for orchestra or any of the other works, the stuff that was more popular of Copland’s because it incorporated obvious elements of the vernacular tradition. So, that was meant as American music, that was sort of sniffed at. I mean, you can say, “Well, do you really want to spend time doing that? That’s okay, that’s popular, but it’s not really—”

Crawford: So, there weren’t new music concerts? I thought I had the impression—

Wilson: Not then, not then, but remember things are changing. Not in 1965. Between ’65 and ’70, when I leave, things change and what happened is, just as you are suggesting, the composers there, the young—because there were a lot of composers who were close to the same age, and we all came about the same time. Dugger came at the same time I came, Randolph Coleman came, who else came? There was an older composer, but he associated with us in certain respects, Dean Nuernberger, and then there were a couple of other
people who came in, Barry Vercoe who didn’t stay very long, but who came and so forth. Now, what this meant was that, we are young, we have got a lot of energy, we needed performances and we said, “Gosh, they ought to be playing our music,” and so we banded together and we began to agitate for new music—

Crawford: Well, that took budget didn’t it, so that was—

Wilson: It took money, that’s right. It is a zero sum game. You have to get it from somewhere now, so because we were young and we wanted to see this happen, we did make it happen. So, by the time I left, we had something called the “Contemporary Direction Series,” playing new music. We got involved in electronic music, and as a matter of fact, I was the impetus to create the first electronic music studio at Oberlin. This was the tape studio model at Oberlin. I actually got the space because there was nothing in this brand new conservatory basement.

Crawford: You were the composer that had done most electronic music?

Wilson: I was the composer that did that, and well see, I was just learning electronic music, and remember I would go back to Illinois in ’67, so I go back but—everybody was just learning it, because it was on the ground floor. So, the point was that it was a period of change, and that was another activity involved in new music and pushing the curriculum. So, being an agent of change, and being predisposed to affect change, you know, we were able to do that.

There were other senior composers, Richard Hoffman was one, but there were several other people who were theory composition people. A person by the name of Robert [Melchard?], another person by the name of Willard [Warch?], I mean, who by that time were well in their late fifties or sixties, and had been there thirty years or something like that.

Crawford: How would you describe their style?

Wilson: They were mainly theorists. I don’t know if they were really composers. There was also Walter Aschaffenburg who was a composer, and Aschaffenburg was in between us, you know, the twenties and the fifties or sixties, so Aschaffenburg must have been about late thirties or forties, probably early forties. Now, his style was more akin somewhat to— influenced somewhat maybe a little bit by Hindemith, Bartok, but at the same time he was familiar with serialism and so forth. Maybe Berg, a kind of a Bergian kind of approach if you would. It is hard to classify it, but it would be something like that. So Aschaffenburg was there, and Aschaffenburg was not opposed to some of the new changes. As a matter of fact he thought it was good too, but now since all these young guys were there, we were all pushing the study of contemporary music, and we were successful in getting it done.
Wilmot: So, these old heads, these old lions, they made room for that to happen, or were they kind of skeptical?

Wilson: Well, it depends I guess with each one. I suspect that—it has to do with two things. Some of the old lions, the people who really were the old lions, were mainly theory teachers. They may have done a little composition—oh, no, there was another person, Joe Wood who was an old lion. But Joe Wood was an easy-going guy, and he was not opposed to anything, but he was sort of out there doing his stuff and just going on. He didn’t get involved in that. Also, he was kind of persona non grata because in the social culture of Oberlin he committed a terrible—he married a student who was about twenty years younger than him, and of course, but he was tenured and it was like—so Joe Wood had some special problems to handle and so forth. So, he was there, but he wasn’t an activist. He came, taught his classes and went home because he had committed what was then considered a terrible thing, marrying a student.

But the other people, as I said, there were Willard Warch and Robert Mellard who are mainly theory teachers, and though they never said that they didn’t like or didn’t think we should be doing this sort of new more avant-garde music, I suspect that their aesthetic stance was not necessarily in concert with that. On the other hand, they never articulated, at least that I have ever heard any opposition to it. Maybe they realized, “Okay, these are young composers, let them try.” Maybe they did the same thing thirty years ago when they were young, I don’t know.

Wilmot: It sounds like such an exciting crossroads to be happening right there, right there.

Wilson: That’s right, it was right there. I mean, right in the sixties when all this innovation was happening it was very exciting. Okay, but then you had this social side. So, I’m involved, with the innovative approaches of new music because that’s where I was, but I am also involved in the innovative studies in terms of African American music and African American culture in general. So, the reflection of that in the conservatory was the creation of several new courses. Of course, I was doing basic research myself trying to figure out, what we are going to teach? How we are going to teach it and so forth? That meant that I had to do research in ways that I hadn’t done.

Wilmot: Like what?

Wilson: Well, for example, I really didn’t know anything about African music. I grew up in the United States. There were occasions when there might be an African music dance troupe around that you hear and so forth, but I really didn’t understand philosophically where it was coming from. I really didn’t understand the structure of the ideas and those kinds of things. I knew I didn’t understand, and I knew that I had to learn. So, at that point I began to read and listen to as much as I could. I wrote people,
for example, I remember I was at Oberlin the first time I had contact with Olatunji.

Olatunji is an interesting person. He was an expatriate Nigerian, and came to the United States to go to the university. Actually, he went to Morehouse. He was studying business or whatever, but he also was a musician. He discovered that he could make money by organizing people, you know, taking some of his relatives and friends who were African and also knew the musical tradition, and then training other people to do it and creating a dance troupe, touring around, and making some money. And then after he graduated he kept doing this, and then he realized he was making more money doing this, and he started producing records. He ultimately developed a career back in New York and he developed a school, the Olatunji School of African Music. So, he became an established figure at that time because he had recordings and so forth. Well, when I became seriously interested in it, of course I didn’t know anybody in Africa, I didn’t know the field of ethnomusicology, which was still relatively new. I began to explore African music and I did discover Olatunji, I remember writing him a letter and asking him if I could come out to observe his school and his Dance Troupe. I was at Oberlin when I took the trip to New York using the faculty research funds to go out there and to watch him and to learn as much as possible about Nigerian music and culture.

Wilmot: So, baseline research in African American and African music meant networking, reaching out to people—

Wilson: Exactly, initially. I mean, preliminarily, and then once you do that, you begin to understand where the books are, if any, and who wrote them and where the people are. And then it was at that time or about that time that some of the early books were being written. I guess, about early sixties, one of the first books of serious studies of African music was being done by an English scholar whose name was A.M. Jones, called *Studies in African Music*. That was published by the Oxford University Press most libraries and contained many musical transcriptions of traditional African music from Ghana.

There were also articles written, research articles, written by various scholars, mainly anthropologists and musicologists. A few people ultimately would become ethnomusicologists, but it was still very basic at that point. There wasn’t a large body of published scholarship to study them. There is a scholar by the name of Hugh Tracy who was doing recording of South African music. And there were occasionally records, like Columbia Records had an African music series, and it said, “Music of West Africa, Music of East Africa.” So, you could get a few recordings, but not serious studies of the music.
So, I began to realize that, and I began to try to do as much as I could, and in the course of which I began to study and discover the people who really were specialists in the field, and I began to make contact with them and so forth.

Wilmot: You said at one time that this in some ways, and I may be saying this wrong, but this represented a shift in your awareness?

Wilson: Yes, a shift in awareness, I think what I was referring to was the whole sixties. That is awareness. I think I said in the context of the sixties and the context of Florida A&M too. So, the awareness in terms of Florida A&M of understanding that there was a meaningful, viable, African American intellectual tradition, focusing on African American culture, and that was something that was very dim in my mind up until Florida A&M. When I met some people I said, “These people really are sharp. They really are talking about it. It is not just the vague thing, you know, ‘go read Langston Hughes;’ it was let’s look very carefully, very seriously about what this is.” Now, people had always been around, but it was over here and over there and over there, and there wasn’t a systematic study to approach. Then, as I began to do it, a number of other people began to do it themselves, to look at this, and began to communicate with one another, and shortly thereafter, about 1970—by then I am already out here, but—well, it may have been—what year was it? There’s a journal, *Black Perspectives in Music*. That’s Eileen Southern’s journal. By the way she died this year. The first journal was I think 1971-72.

Wilmot: You created this piece, “Biography,” using LeRoi Jones’ [Amiri Baraka’s] texts, and that was in 1966. How did that come into being, and did you work with him on that or did you just—?

Wilson: No, what happened is that—and that’s a perfect example of one’s own awareness. I was given a commission by an ensemble that was called, it was a new music ensemble in St. Louis, I forget the name of it right now. But Robert Wykes was involved in that, remember he was my composition teacher, and he was involved in that. So, they called me and said, “Olly, we would like you to write a piece for us. You can write anything and it should be for voice and ensemble, but you can write anything.” So, I said, “Okay, fine, great.” It was exciting, to get a commission. I don’t think, I don’t even know what the money—whatever the money was, it was very little, but the idea that somebody just calls you up and asks you to write a piece. It was just great for me at that point.

Crawford: Was there an occasion for which that was to be?

Wilson: Yes, there was a concert they had scheduled. This was for the next year’s spring concert or something. So, I said, “Okay, great.” So, I began to look at poetry, and I was reading a lot of black poets at that time, and I had heard about LeRoi Jones anyway because he was really an extraordinary poet. I found this poetry called “Biography.” The writing, I mean it was a very stark
poem, and a very angry poem, but a very resonating poem. So, I said, “Oh I want to set that.”

Wilmot: I am not familiar with the text. I am wondering if there is—what resonated?

Wilson: Well, it was really about a lynching, and it was done in very poetic terms, but also very wrenching terms. It resonated because also, remember some of the things that occurred in the sixties—freedom riders and people—if you remember Emmett Till, and [Michael] Schwerner, [Andy] Goodman and you know, that whole series of things going on. And this was a poetic statement of the human loss and the anger that these acts generate. And yet it was a reality, you had to deal with that. So, that became very important. So, what I did was to write to the publishers of the book. I knew that if you are going to use somebody’s poem, you have to get permission. So, I wrote to the publishers of the little book that I found, and I wrote to the publishers, and I said, “I would like to set this to music, may I have permission?” I wrote with some trepidation because sometimes publishers say, “Yeah, for five hundred dollars or a thousand dollars or something” and so I said, “I am a composer, I am teaching at Oberlin, and I would like permission?” But this press, the kind of press that publishes these books, you know, not one of these big fancy presses anyway, they probably were glad somebody was going to do it. So, they gave me permission. They said, “Okay” and didn’t charge me a cent. So, I said, “Okay,” so then I set the poem.

Then it was performed and so forth, and I got it copyrighted so it was fine. I was very pleased with the performance. I did meet LeRoi Jones during the—did I talk about this period at Oberlin when—? [refers to discussion that was lost in audio gap in interview three]

Wilmot: People came through? I would like to hear more about that actually.

Wilson: People came through. I did talk about it—but I talked about LeRoi Jones, Ralph Ellison—?

Wilmot: James Baldwin maybe?

Wilson: No. Tom—?

Crawford: Kenneth Clark, he was one.

Wilson: Kenneth Clark, the psychologist. Kenneth Clark and Ralph Ellison and LeRoi Jones, (Amiri Baraka) Amiri Baraka had just become Amiri Baraka. [LeRoi Jones changed his name to Amiri Baraka in 1968.] Now, one of the things that I did in the African American music course, because by then I was teaching, I think the course started in ’67, and when he came it must have been ’68. It was before the assassination of Martin Luther King, so it must have been ’68. I remember I had used his book, Blues People in that course, and I used that
book because what he attempts to do in that book is to give a study of the
relationship of music to social and political reality and show how the music
does or doesn’t reflect the changes in social/political reality and so forth. And
he had some insightful, very insightful things to say. It’s the book I still use. I
have taught that course in African American music at Berkeley for thirty-two
years. I’ve taught it ever since—when I came here, I said “I want to teach that,
I want to continue teaching that course.” So, I taught it. It was the first time
they had a course like that, but I did it, and I did it for years—I didn’t teach it
every year, I taught it every other year. It expanded from I think at Oberlin it
was probably just a one semester course, but it expanded to a year course
because the more I knew, the more it took to deal with it.

Wilmot: Did you talk to him about this work when he came?

Wilson: You know, I don’t think I did. I know I didn’t, and the reason why I didn’t is
that he was—it was a very difficult time for him, and he could be a very
difficult person. He really empathized with me though because prior to
becoming LeRoi Jones, well he was always LeRoi Jones, but prior to
becoming Amiri Baraka, he had been a poet, a writer, who had also taught at a
small liberal arts college. And sort of understood the dynamics of a college.
But now he was a raging revolutionary, and he had with him his whole troop
of bodyguards and so forth. All of whom were like seventeen years old, I
mean, you know, they were young kids. It was a really, you know, it was a
sort of para-military organization. They all wore uniforms and all had names
of a sort and so forth, which was an interesting dynamic seeing these kids
from the inner city of Newark interacting with the talented tenth and others at
Oberlin. It was a very interesting social dynamic, but that’s another long story.

Crawford: So, he never heard your piece?

Wilson: I don’t know. I don’t think he did. I mean, he may have somewhere along the
way. I have seen him on other occasions and I have talked to him, but I don’t
think—to my knowledge he hasn’t. I never said, “Here, this is a piece that I
used your poetry on. I want you to hear it.”

Crawford: How was that received, Olly? I remember talking to Dr. Wykes about it. He
said, “My, that was an angry piece.”

Wilson: Yeah, it was—you know, I really don’t, I am trying to think. It was—I mean
the text was really wrenching, you know, as I said. I think it ends up with the
“Granddaddy, granddaddy, they broke his neck,” or something like that. I
mean, it was really in your face. I think there was kind of a stunned silence,
you know, because let’s face it, the audience for new music, then as now, was
like ninety-nine percent white, of different political viewpoints. Some of the
people could probably understand and related to it, and some of the people
probably couldn’t and didn’t. But it was well played and well performed and
fine, you know, and it certainly gave everybody something to think about. So, it was interesting.

The whole thing about a piece like that, a lot depends on where it’s performed and who’s performing it. The musical language was very contemporary, you know, very contemporary. The text was very forceful, and I think appropriate for a piece called “Biography,” and you see—now, but the text was pretty big, but people don’t necessarily read the text because of the program. How many times do you go to a concert and then you don’t look at what the text is until the music starts, and you only do that because you want to know where they are, how long you have to go and so forth. I think, in this case, I am sure there are some people who were upset, but a lot of people weren’t. I mean, this was also the sixties, and there were a lot of people who were angry about a lot of things. I mean, this was the social crucible with a lot of different things going on.

Crawford: Did this enhance your reputation as a revolutionary?

Wilson: I don’t really think, I am not sure how many people ever heard the piece. I suspect, it was a new music—there probably were maybe one hundred people there if that many.

Crawford: So, it wasn’t something that had repercussions within the university community.

Wilson: No, no, no. I don’t think so. I mean, maybe after I left people said, “Who was that crazy guy,” but I mean, I never heard any repercussions about it, except that some people liked the piece and thought it was well done, and some people probably didn’t. It didn’t become a cause célèbre or anything. It didn’t have many performances either.

Wilmot: It did represent something that came—it looks different from your work prior to that. I am just thinking in terms of titles. I am wondering, and this is a funny question, what did Elouise have to say about that?

Wilson: Sure, sure. What did Elouise? God, I can’t remember. I wonder if Elouise, I don’t think Elouise—Elouise wasn’t at the performance because the performance was in St. Louis, we were in Oberlin, and though St. Louis is both of our homes, we probably couldn’t afford for both of us to go, and then we had kids. She knew about the piece because then I probably talked to her and said, “Hey, look at this poem I’m working on, what do you think?” I mean, I probably did that so she knew about it, but I don’t remember a reaction about it one way or another.

But it was an angry time. I mean, you have to understand the context of the period. The context of the period was it was really a revolutionary time, and of course, people back in the sixties, and depending on where they were at the
sixties and what they were doing at the sixties, revolutionary seems overblown. People talk about the excesses of the sixties, without talking about the important advances that were made in the sixties. And the cost of that, I mean, there were people who—because of what we now know was the COINTEL program, [Counter-Intelligence Programs], there were people who were killed, there are people whose records were [tarnished] and—whose lives were irreparably harmed as a result of the anti-civil rights movement that resulted, the backlash that came, and also from the trivialization of it.

I mean, I still believe today that the—the press in general, but it’s hard to make a sweeping generalization like that because the press is as varied as I guess the nation is—but, many people in the mainstream press tend to trivialize the sixties, and to think of it as a time when there were excesses. Sure, there were some excesses, but by and large, the country really needed that direction, otherwise we would be on—that’s why the stuff that’s going on today with Senator [Trent] Lott is so ridiculous. Here is a guy who is saying Strom Thurmond, 1948, the guy who was saying “Segregation, now forever,” said “We voted for them in Mississippi”—and they did, and that the country would have been a lot better off if he had won. Now, that’s pretty heavy—

Crawford: He said it. There is no apology.

Wilson: Yeah, there is no question about that, and he had said essentially the same thing before, and he has been in places and in the company of dyed in the wool segregationists over and over again. Now, that sort of tells you, and the response to that, what I think is sad is that the apologists for this, I saw on Ted Koppel the other night, last night. There was Ted Koppel on, there was somebody else doing the interviewing, and there were two black—there was Julian Bond, there were two young black people, one of whom works for the Republican Party recruiting blacks, and the other of whom was a reporter, but had been, obviously had been a GOP reporter, but had also done speechwriting for what’s his name, Newt Gingrich. Now, the youngest one was a young black guy, and he was the strongest apologist for Trent Lott I have ever seen. He was saying, “Well, Lott’s a good man, I know he’s a good man, and people should be taking after the Democrats. Senator Byrd said some things that could be construed as being racist a few years ago and nobody took after him. And why are people talking about [Lott]. It’s only a Democratic ploy.” Knowing that often he’s being a good person because his job is to go out there and to defend Lott, and that’s what he is doing. I mean, he made Clarence Thomas, or he made Ward Connerly, sound like a saint, in the sense that this guy—and he’s young, he’s young, neat, clean, clearly he’s reasonably intelligent, but his whole perspective is completely skewed. He doesn’t understand that he could not possibly have been doing what he was doing if it hadn’t been for what happened in the sixties. And that’s the frustrating thing about it because every generation recreates reality, but we do have something called a historical consciousness, and it is important for people who are reasonably intelligent to try to understand something or
another. But for a person to come out and to articulate this Neanderthal view is really sick.

Wilmot: You described this very intense period of time, and what was it like for you to experience the sixties from the academy?

Wilson: Okay, on one hand we had the protection of the academy because you were in the academy. I mean, I wasn’t—I participated in demonstrations, both in Oberlin and in other places, and we weren’t far from Cleveland, and of course about that time one of the important things that was happening is that Carl Stokes was running for mayor. I remember going up to Cleveland and carrying a group of students, a lot of students from the Black Student Union, and we got together and we all went to Cleveland, and we canvassed in the neighborhoods in the black communities trying to get people to come out to vote. I remember that very, very clearly. I was back in Cleveland recently; I thought about that in some of the neighborhoods.

Crawford: Was he the first black mayor?

Wilson: He was the first black mayor of a major city. I think there was another person who had become a black mayor of Bloomington? Not Bloomington, but there is a city in Indiana that’s right outside of Chicago, I can’t think of the name of it right now, but that guy was the first black mayor. But Carl Stokes was the first of a major American city, and he was successful and so forth, but the campaign was a tough one because Cleveland, like many northern industrial cities is very balkanized, you know, this is a Greek neighborhood, this is the Italian neighborhood, the German neighborhood, you know, and the black neighborhood, so you had to make all kinds of coalitions in order to be successful.

But the whole point about that is the reality of people who were victims of the struggle, as we used to say, it was really very true. I mean, there were people whose lives were changed completely. Some of them were students who really participated in the freedom rides or just got so angry and so upset that they really weren’t able to function, you know, and some of them didn’t finish their degrees, some of them got strung out on drugs, some of them got involved with Black Panthers or this or that or Black Muslims or some other group and became really just out of the mainstream completely and some people got killed. I didn’t know—I knew of people who were killed. I didn’t have a personal friend who was killed during that period, but I knew that. I knew that this happened. I knew people whose lives were changed because they couldn’t handle the anger. The anger consumed them, and a result they were so angry they became—it became debilitating.

Crawford: People at Oberlin per se?
Wilson: Yeah, there were a couple of students who eventually dropped out, and you know, I often wonder—

Crawford: There weren’t any restrictions on your activity or your expression for instance?

Wilson: No, there weren’t any restrictions on it, but people were so angry that the anger became psychotic. I mean, they hated people, they hated anybody white. Well, you can’t go around hating anybody who is a different race than you are without becoming what you hate. So, you could see that happening to a couple of people. I remember, there was a girl, there was a woman, young woman, whose—what was her name, we had a name for her. She was very outspoken, I mean everybody was outspoken, but she was extremely outspoken and really just was spouting venom all the time. Now, most people could get upset, but they could set aside—there was the ideological position and then there is a personal side. This is Oberlin where you are meeting people from all over the world, you know, even though the majority of people were Caucasian Americans, so you had to learn how to live within the world and—and deal with people as individuals. At the same time, you don’t give up your principles about the ideology and the injustice. So, but some people couldn’t make that switch, and those people often were—

Wilmot: There was a lot to be angry about. I have a question for you, and if you have more to say on this then please continue, but I have a question for you and this is kind of going to be—unless Carolyn has further questions, I was going to kind of have this be the last question.

Crawford: I think this is a good time to—

Wilmot: That was about your family life at this time. You mentioned you have two children now, and I just wanted to ask you where were you living, what was Elouise doing?

Wilson: We were living in Oberlin. Elouise was working as a medical technologist. What happened is that—remember when we got married, she started working as a medical technologist, even before we were married. Did I talk about moving to Illinois, and she moving first?

Wilmot: Yeah, you talked about that.

Wilson: Okay. So, then she worked while I was in graduate school, so she was the principal breadwinner, and we were living reasonably well for graduate students, so that was good. Then we go to Florida A&M, the kids start coming and—at least Dawn comes, so she stops working. She worked some there, but then she stopped working, and started staying with Dawn.

Wilmot: Who was Dawn named for?
Wilson: Dawn?

Wilmot: The sunrise?

Wilson: The sunrise. We couldn’t—you know, it’s funny about names. As a grandparent that becomes really important, but as a parent, especially a young parent, I mean I was twenty-six or something like that, and—no, I was younger than that—anyway, you know, we just looked at books and said “Oh, we like this name,” and that was it. It was Dawn Lynn, and we liked Dawn. We were going to name her Angela, but Frank Green’s daughter was named Angela, and since Frank was our good friend and his daughter was named Angela, we said, “No, we better get another name.” So, we got Dawn, and we loved Dawn, and that is why she was Dawn. It was that simple. But, we were living in Oberlin. We had a house. We had a family life. The kids, young kids, were important. You know, when you have young kids you are rushing around behind them, and spending a lot of time. And between that and the University, and besides, Oberlin is a small town. I mean, the total population is about eight thousand. At the time it was eight thousand, it may be ten now, if that much. You could walk any direction to the outskirts of town in less than a half an hour. So, it was a small little town on the flats of Northern Ohio. So, you know, life was pretty simple. You would go, you would teach your classes. It was great for working there because there wasn’t much else to do. There was one theatre, one major grocery store, two restaurants in town, there were a couple hamburger joints, but two basic restaurants in town, everything else in your life was associated with the University, but since you are seeing the same people all the time, you get a little tired of that. It was great for kids because kids could run outside, and we had a big backyard, a white house that was a Cape Cod kind of house, an A-line house. And the guy who lived there before we did was a great handyman. He had built all of these nice things, including double bunk beds for the little boys’ rooms, and it was really nice and it had a big lawn in the backyard and we had fruit trees out there. It was idyllic. There was a little plum creek. You could walk down and the kids could—I remember teaching Dawn how to ride the bike, running up and down the streets behind her and then letting go at the right time until she—and you know, she didn’t realize she was going by herself for a while. When she did, I was close enough to grab her before she fell. Now, she just got my granddaughter a bike, and I’m saying, “Who’s running up and down the streets with her?” So, when I go down to see them I am probably going to run up and down the streets with her.

Wilmot: What year was your son born?

Wilson: My son was born in 1964. He was born in Iowa, and that was when I did the PhD. So, his first reality was when we went back to Florida A&M in 1964, but he was in Oberlin when we were at Oberlin so he was a little baby in Oberlin. I remember on one occasion, at least, Dawn went to the school that you could see from our house. You go up about half of a block, this was on a street
called Spring Street, and she went to Eastwood School. Once, when he was three years old, he saw her going and he decided to run to go to school. He was only three years old, and Elouise saw him, so she was chasing after him, and there was a big major street, the major street, and she is scared he is going to get killed. She is screaming, and he is not hearing her, he’s just—fortunately, he somehow managed to get across that street without getting smashed, and went into the school yard and started trying to play with Dawn’s friends and so forth. So, I mean, that’s our old family story that we tell him. Of course, he doesn’t remember anything about it now.

Wilmot: Were you at the labors? Were you at the births? Were you at your son’s birth?

Wilson: Okay, yeah, that’s another story. I was at the birth of Dawn, but in those days—she was born in 1961. In 1961, you couldn’t, this is the Florida A&M University hospital. Florida A&M University hospital was a big, really nice hospital. This was another legacy of segregation. Because things were segregated there, sometimes this would be played out in ways that meant that there was a large institution there like an excellent hospital in the black community so that blacks would not be over with the whites. So, you have this very interesting hospital which was much larger than it needed to be, but you know, the separate but equal doctrine mandated that this was done. So, Dawn was born there. The hospital no long exists. With integration and that stuff, that’s gone, but it was a good hospital so she was born there. At that time, in that hospital, fathers couldn’t go into the birthing room, you know, you stood outside, and then somebody would walk by a window or come out and said, “Mr. Wilson, this is your daughter.” I remember seeing Dawn, and she had big black eyes, big beautiful black eyes, and “here is the baby.”

Crawford: I can believe that.

Wilson: She was just—and I couldn’t believe that because most babies have their eyes closed, but her eyes were wide open and it just really struck me—you know how the blue in babies eyes are, that special blue. I couldn’t believe it. It was just amazing to me. So that was the first thing.

Kent’s birth was also interesting. When he was born I wasn’t there.

Crawford: You know, I think we better break here here.

[End interview]
Interview 5: January 30, 2003

Wilson: Okay, I think I was telling you about the time I missed my son’s birth. And I missed it because I was going to Chicago for a job interview. It was August and I had completed all of the work on my degree but I still didn’t have a job. I was desperate to try and get a job because I didn’t want to return to Florida A & M where I’d taught before, just because I had seen the limits of what I could do there. So I heard about a job interview. There was a posting of a job interview in Chicago. An interview was coming from the University of Maine, but in those days—I’m now talking about 1960—there were no funds for bringing interviewees, potential applicants, for the interview so you had to pay yourself. So I said well you know it’s a possibility. That morning I told Elouise that we had planned to go. I was going with a colleague of mine who also was looking for a job. We went up together to have this interview. Well, we had to go at our own expense and went to some hotel in the middle of Chicago.

That morning I asked Elouise how she was feeling. She was of course then close to term. Well, I guess she was at term. We were expecting the baby any day, but it was a one-day trip; I was going in the morning and coming back that evening. That morning I asked her how she was doing. She said, “I’m doing perfectly fine. Go ahead, don’t worry about it. Everything will be okay.” I go up for the job interview and when I get back that evening she’s delivered the child. And I’m going, “Oh, that’s terrible!” you know, because I missed the birth of my son. To compound that, when we got there, the interviewer really had no real interest in us. So in retrospect, he clearly was simply coming there probably for a trip or something. He had no real interest in either me or the other person who came with me.

But, when I had the interview, he kept asking me what would my salary be, what was my current salary. I said well I’m in graduate school. Well, he said, “What’s your salary going to be? Do you have any job offers?” I said “Yes, I do have an offer from Florida A & M.” So he wanted to know what the salary was. I didn’t want to tell him what that salary was because it was higher than most of the starting salaries for PhDs. At that time, 1960, starting salary for PhDs in music was around $7,000. I had been offered $9,000 at Florida A & M. Simple matter of racial politics. That is, at Florida A & M, because it was a traditionally African American school, it had to pay more in order to maintain the required quota of PhDs, so they offered people who had PhDs $9,000. When I left there, I was making $5,000 and so the fact that I got a PhD, they wanted me to come back, they offered an incentive to come back: more money. It was one of the costs of segregation. But I didn’t want to return. So I tried to explain this to the person but he insisted on knowing. So I don’t want to lie and I don’t want to evade him because I want a job and maybe this will work for me. So I told him $9,000. That blew him away. He said $9,000! He was up, he was concerned. The rest of the interview, he was questioning me and trying to understand why they were offering me $9,000. In retrospect, he
had been working a few years, his salary had probably been $9,000 or a little bit more. So he was wondering what was this guy just coming out of school with a PhD getting $9,000? So I tried to explain it but it didn’t make any—apparently he didn’t hear.

My colleague went in after I did and going back on the train, I noticed he was looking a little glum. He said to me, “Olly, when you go for an interview, you shouldn’t tell people how much money you’re offering.” I said, “Wait a minute. You have to understand this, I didn’t offer this information. The interviewer wanted to know, insisted on knowing.” I had to tell him and I explained to him the situation. Of course, he was upset because obviously the guy in the interview instead of talking to him about him, he was talking about me and this $9,000. So it was really a crazy situation.

To make a long story short, I go back and then I discovered my wife was giving birth to the baby. I’m upset that I wasn’t even there. It was a real fiasco. Eventually I did go back to Florida A & M. I taught for another year, and at the end of that year, I applied for a job at Oberlin, which I was told about it by a colleague, a former professor at Iowa.

Wilmot: On the heels of that story about the birth of your son, I want to just recognize that you told me today that you are a grandfather again and that your daughter gave birth to twins.

Wilson: Right, right. Twins, this is really exciting and they were two boys. In my family, there are a much larger complement of females rather than males. My father was the only surviving male out of a group of maybe 8 or 9 or more. He was the only male that lived to adulthood. So I’m the only surviving—and I’m his only son. I’m the only Wilson of that particular line of the family that still exists. Then my son, I only had one son myself, he now has one son. But, I have three sisters on the other hand, and a large number of nieces, maybe one or two nephews but a large number of nieces, so all of a sudden to have this sort of a balance of more males coming into the family is interesting.

Wilmot: Evening things out?

Wilson: Evening it out, balancing it out a little bit. So it’s good to have that.

Wilmot: By the way today is January 30, 2003. I wanted to spend today talking about your early years at UC Berkeley. I guess just to start I wanted to ask when you were at Oberlin, what did you hear of Berkeley before you thought of coming to teach there? What kind of things did you hear about what was going on on campus?

Wilson: Well, Berkeley was a well-established, major institution. So, I knew about Berkeley superficially. I knew it was an outstanding university across the board, that it was a premiere institution, and a desirable place to teach. That’s
everything I heard. And also living in northern California—California, I heard
was an interesting place though, no, I had never had visited California at that
time. Late 1969, I had never visited California. But what happened was that
there was a faculty member from Berkeley who was an organist, Dan [Larry?]
Moe who came to Oberlin, he was giving a concert. And while he was there,
he asked me would you perhaps be interested in coming out to talk to us at
Berkeley about a position. That sort of caught me by surprise. I was surprised
he even asked me that. I said, “Of course!” just by someone raising the
possibility. By that time I had been at Oberlin four years and I loved Oberlin.
It was exciting, I was involved with a lot of things there, but Oberlin also was
a small town and I think another five years there, I would have been bored.

And you were a full professor at Oberlin?

No, no. I had only been teaching, let’s see—I taught two years at Florida A &
M then I went back to graduate school, taught another year at Florida A & M,
and then came to Oberlin and I taught for four years. So I had only been
teaching a total of, outside of grad school, like four or five years. So, I was
still an assistant professor, up for promotion to associate professor. And that
year, 1967, I won an international competition, a composition competition for
electronic music. That was very good for my career, so I knew the probability
of me getting promoted to associate professor was good. My reviews from
teaching were all very good; I was dedicated and involved in that. And it was
exciting. I was still very much dedicated and still am. I love teaching and so
forth. So, things were going well for me in Oberlin. So this idea of coming out
to interview at Berkeley was just out of the blue.

Now, in retrospect, one of the things that probably precipitated that was that I
had a colleague who started teaching at Oberlin the same time I did. His name
was Ed [Edwin] Dugger. That was Ed Dugger’s first job. That was my second
job because I had started teaching at Florida A & M before. But Ed had just
finished graduate school and just finished his MFA from Princeton and had
come back to Oberlin to teach. He was originally an undergraduate at Oberlin.
He was a friend to us. And that particular year in Oberlin, this is 1965, a
number of new composers/theorists started working there, about four or five
of us. Ed was one of them, I was one of them, a guy named Randy Coleman
was one of them, a composer by the name of Barry [Vercoe] who may come a
year after that. But there were four or five composers, starting about the same
time. We were all relatively young and this was our first or second job. Ed
stayed at Oberlin for three years then he got an offer to come to Berkeley so
he came to Berkeley. I suspect Ed must have told the people about me since
we were friends—we were friends but we were not real, real close but close
enough, colleagues, I guess. Then when Professor Moe came to the campus,
he said, “We’d like you to come out if you’re going to be in California some
time soon.” That particular year there was a conference at UC Santa Barbara
and I was planning to go. I think that’s when he asked me are you planning to
Wilmot: Come up to Berkeley?

Wilson: Yes, come up to Berkeley and have an interview. In those days, this was way before anything having to do with systematic recruitment. It really was the old boy network. Somebody picked up the phone and said look, “What kind of candidates do you have? What young students do you have that are really hot?” you know. They’d say, well x, y, and z. That’s the way it was, that was how it was done. I was invited to come out for an interview. I went to Santa Barbara, then I took a plane and came up to Berkeley.

Now, Santa Barbara is right on the coast, you know, right on the beach. It was very beach-like, that kind of California, Southern California, nice and warm, on the beach, but none of that really interested me. Small town kind of thing, it really didn’t interest me. When I came to Berkeley, though, and we landed in San Francisco, it was beautiful. I drove up to Northern California and it was a marvelous day. The climate was perfect. I was really attracted and impressed by the diversity of people. And I also was impressed by the vitality that this area seemed to exude all over the place.

This also was in the context, this was 1969, it was in the context of the Third World Strike. I can’t remember which part of the year it was but there weren’t any major demonstrations that I saw, but I’d heard about the demonstrations and things going on and so forth. I had heard about the Third World College and things like that. It wasn’t exactly clear what was going on but I was politically astute enough to know that this was going on. Besides, I had been very much involved in the Black Student Movement at Oberlin. And this kind of thing sort of was happening to different degrees in different places of the country so I wasn’t surprised by it. But, when I was here, I asked, you know, “I’d like to speak to other Black faculty that you have in the university. I want to get an impression of what they think, how they think this institution is, how it really functions,” et cetera, et cetera. And that must have been a little bit different. I don’t think many people ask—well, first, they didn’t interview that many black candidates and secondly, I think they had to think a little bit because there were no black faculty in the music department nor had there ever been at the time, at least as far as I’m aware. So, they did know a couple of people, somebody in the faculty knew some of the people. One of the persons they knew was Troy Duster who had been here, so they called up Troy and I went and had lunch with Troy. That’s the first time I met Troy. We sort of talked a lot and we were compatible in a lot of ways and about the same generation and so forth. So it was an interesting kind of meeting.

Some of the same issues that had occurred at Oberlin occurring at Berkeley but each institute is a little different. Berkeley had been more complicated because of the Third World Strike and the issue of not teaching classes on
campus. You could still teach your classes but you taught them outside of campus. All of that was going on. I inquired about—one of the things I was interested in because of my relationship at Oberlin was whether or not I wanted to have a joint appointment, if I were interested in having some kind of affiliation with the Black Studies Department. Well, I wanted to find out more about the Black Studies Department. Right at that time the Black Studies Department was in a major fight with different factions and it was very clear to me that it didn’t make sense for me to step into this. I was going to teach what I was going to teach. One of the things I proposed to teach—well they asked me to come as a composer. But when I came, I said, “Look, I started a course on African American Music at Oberlin and I would like to teach that as well.” They said, “No problem.” They said, “As a matter of fact there is a new African American Studies Department being developed at Berkeley. You might want to have a course listed there. You might even want to have an even more permanent relationship with the Black Studies Department.”

So I said well let me find out more about the department. Okay so at that time it was just an interview and we were just exploring possibilities. I didn’t even know if they were going to offer me a position or not. All I knew was let me find out more about it. So I went over and I talked to what’s her name? There was a woman who taught literature there. Not Barbara Christian, this was before Barbara Christian was there, but another woman who was teaching part-time. I forget her name but she had also been at Oberlin for a short while. I can’t think of her name right now. [Sarah Fabio?] Anyway, I talked to her and she was very candid, very refreshing and very candid about how the different political ideologies were clashing with one another and so forth and how it was a mess and how it also was a battleground between people who were adherents of the Black Panthers as opposed to adherents of—there was something called the Republic of New Africa. Of course, this was played out larger, across the country, fights between the cultural revolutionaries and the Black Panthers. Sort of two different positions: the group called US, Ron Karenga’s group, and then the Black Panthers on the other hand. I had seen aspects or expressions of that in the Midwest.

Wilmot: I don’t think I realized that was also present at Berkeley. For some reason I tend to think of that as mostly a Southern California conflict?

Wilson: No, it was very big because the headquarters of the Black Panthers are right here. I mean, when I came to Berkeley in the late sixties you’d go out on the corner of Telegraph and Bancroft, you’d have the Black Panthers on one corner selling newspapers; you’d have the Black Muslims on another corner selling newspapers; you’d have the Republic of New Africa, which is a group that sort of disappeared, and then you wouldn’t see them selling newspapers as much but they were adherents for the US group. And then there were the Hari Krishnas. It was a circus. I mean, there was everybody going on with their political ideology and so on. A lot of which, the context of the sixties and
the revolutions and kind of ideas that were being presented, it was a heady time.

But I felt, “Well look, given where I’m coming from and what my position is, I don’t want to get embroiled in a major thing that’s going to take me away from my scholarship, from my creative work, because I’m fighting battles.” There were silly things like people threatening each other. It was pretty bad from a certain point of view. So I said, okay, no, if I’m offered a position at Berkeley I want to be part of the music department. The Black Studies department at that time was too complicated. People didn’t know. People had different concepts of what it should be. It was not settled. I said I’ll teach my course, I’ll do what I can do and I’ll participate politically, but on my own terms. That was the decision I made.

Fortunately, there was indeed an offer for me to come to Berkeley and I did accept that offer because I thought Northern California was a beautiful, exciting place for a lot of different reasons, so it was great. So I was given the offer in 1969. I think this was in the early spring in 1969, but I was committed to Oberlin for another year so I deferred coming to Berkeley in the fall of 1969 and came in the fall of 1970. That’s what happened. Because I just didn’t want to leave Oberlin in the middle of the year. They had been good to me, given me an opportunity, and I wanted to give them at least a year so I gave them a year. Berkeley was willing to wait a year so I came out in 1970. So that was the deal.

Now, you have a lot of questions?

Wilmot: I have several questions. I just wanted to ask who interviewed you?

Wilson: Who interviewed me? In those days and we still do it in the music department, the entire department interviewed. That is, we went into the faculty lounge, the same faculty lounge that still exists and all of the faculty was there. I mean there were some people who were either out of town, on leave, or couldn’t make it for one reason or another. They interviewed me. Sometimes in groups, sometimes there would be a group of maybe five to seven. Another hour, there would be another group, so everybody had an opportunity to come and talk to me. So there were groups of people, which consisted of all of the ladder rank faculty in the music department. It was a pleasant interview. We talked about everything from what I felt about teaching techniques, teaching music theory, what my ideals were, what were my ambitions and goals as a composer, what my experience had been as a performer—I was still playing double base—and at that time what I had done, what I wanted to do, what I thought about the direction in electronic music, and what I thought about the direction of contemporary music and so forth. They had listened to pieces, tapes of music I had sent of my music and so forth. It was an interesting exchange. It was pleasant. It was not the marathon kind of situation that exists now. When we have candidates come, they have to give a formal lecture, they have to
interview the kind of interview I had, they have to teach a class, and all that stuff. In those days you didn’t do that. You were asked to speak to the people who were the faculty. You were asked about your own work and you would submit it if you had written any articles and things like that, you’d submit that. That might be a source of some questions and so forth but it wasn’t the more formal thing where you give a formal lecture, you give a formal class and so forth. But it was fine. I could have done that too, because by that time I had been teaching and I felt confident. I had been teaching for four or five years at that point.

Wilmot: I understand there was this environment on campus where the student body was really pressing the administration to hire more faculty of color?

Wilson: Absolutely.

Wilmot: Did you have a sense if that played any role in the decision?

Wilson: I’m sure it did. I mean, in the context of the sixties and late sixties, oh yeah. I’m sure it did. I’m sure. Nobody ever said that to me, but I mean common sense suggested that this was one of the reasons that I was invited out in the first place. Because I had made the jump successfully from a traditional Black university to a place of quality like Oberlin and I had been there for five years. Then, I had just won an international contest, so—you know, I had written a couple of articles that were published in journals. So I was on the right track in terms of meeting the standard criteria. If you just look at what I had done—completed the PhD, published some articles in a refereed journal, won an international competition, having major performances in places that people had heard of. It was a pretty good profile, the kind of profile that Berkeley normally looks for and then I happened to also be black. I think because of that, somebody—I’m sure not sure what happened but what I think happened is that the university in response to the kinds of things that were going on and the push for developing a broader and more diversified faculty and developing a broader and more diversified curriculum, I’m sure the university said, we’re trying to do something and they said, do something. So, as a consequence, I think there probably were some incentives they offered to the department that said, okay if you’re serious about this, if you can find somebody, why don’t you bring them to our attention. So I think it was that kind of thing.

Now I did know there were a couple of Black students in the music department—I found out about this much later—there was an undergraduate. As a matter of fact, I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of the musician, percussionist whose name is Bill Sommers?

Wilmot: Yes.

Wilson: Bill Sommers was a student at Berkeley at the time, an undergraduate student. He told me later on that he had written letters or complained about there not
being anybody who had any serious interest in African American music and so forth and so on. I’m sure that Bill and perhaps a few others had raised these issues before. But those kinds of issues were constantly being raised. Most faculty didn’t pay much attention or threw up their hands and said, well, we can’t find anybody like that. I think given that that push that was coming from the students in general, specifically and in general, and given the tenure of the times, and given the fact that there were sensitive people in the music department who said “Yeah, we ought to do something about that.” I think there must have been meetings where people said hey do you know anybody? I think that’s the kind of thing that probably triggered Ed Dugger to say yes I know a person, Olly Wilson. It turned out that Ed Dugger happened to also have been from St. Louis. We were both in St. Louis when I was a teenager— I may have mentioned this, that I went to the Washington University Saturday music theory classes. Did I say anything about that?

Wilmot: Not that I recall.

Wilson: Okay, well when I was in high school—this was back in the fifties—Washington University had established a music theory class for students who were seriously interested in pursuing music as an academic subject. And to prepare them, since music theory wasn’t commonly offered in most high schools, they had a special Saturday music theory class. They sent out a notice to all the schools saying, “We’re having a special music theory class to which we invite all your students who you think are seriously interested in going on to study music in college to take these classes.” Now that kind of thing had happened from time to time. What was exceptional about that was that it included the Black students because in St. Louis at the time the schools were segregated. But they sent out the announcements, not only to the traditional white schools, but they sent it to the major black high schools in St. Louis. I was a student there then and so I heard about it. There were a couple of us, myself and Grace Bumbry, the singer. Grace Bumbry was also interested in that and so we would go out to Washington University together. There were a handful of black kids, most of the kids there were White.

Wilmot: You told this story already.

Wilson: I think I did tell it. So anyway, as it turned out Ed Dugger was also a student in that class. I didn’t know him personally at that time, and he didn’t know me personally. Of course, since I was black, he probably remembered there were a couple of black kids here and that’s one of them. But it wasn’t until much later at Oberlin and probably even at Berkeley that we started talking. We started talking about our high schools and he talked about going to that summer music place. I said, “I was there too.” So we discovered that we knew each other, but I didn’t know him and he didn’t know me, at that point. We knew each other at Oberlin and then when I came to Berkeley, you know, trying to find a house—we had just bought a house in Oberlin in 1969 and we had it for a year and we paid $19,000 for it, a stretch for us at that point. We
bought this beautiful house, four bedrooms, a beautiful yard with palm trees, idyllic small Ohio town.

Wilmot: Palm trees in Ohio?

Wilson: Not palm trees, fruit trees. Plum trees and pear trees and then there might have even been a grapevine or something. It was really beautiful and great for little kids and great for us too. It was a nice yard, except we had to mow the lawn and that was a big lawn to do, but it was an idyllic situation. However, the next year I get the job offer from Berkeley so we had to sell the house. We bought it for $19,000; we sold it for $20,000. I thought I was a big time operator because I made a thousand dollars. Then I come to Berkeley and you couldn’t find a house that you would want to live in for less than $40,000. This is 1970. I’m going, wow, what am I going to do? I don’t have that kind of money. So we rented some property. Ed Dugger, since he knew we were coming from Oberlin, and he had gone through the same thing when he came here too, he helped us find a house. We ended up renting a house up on Euclid, you know right near Cordones Park, 1191 Euclid.

Wilmot: And that was okay for you? That process of finding a place to live?

Wilson: That was okay, that was okay for the year because it was large enough for the two kids; the schools at the time in Berkeley were really good. Our kids went to schools—kids were being bused—so Dawn was being bused to Columbus School. What was called Columbus School, which is down right near San Pablo. And Kent went to Craigmont School, which is closer to our home in our regular neighborhood, that is, when he started school. When he first came he wasn’t going to school, but when he started that was his first school. So this whole transition was an interesting one in terms of coming from Oberlin to Berkeley.

Then, once I got to Berkeley, what happened was that the next year I won a Guggenheim. And with that Guggenheim, it not only paid all of my salary in those days but it also had travel funds. I could travel anywhere in the world I wanted to and it helped me pay the traveling expenses; that was part of the grant. So I said okay, I’ve never been since I had already been interested in studying African American music—

Wilmot: You’re moving right into your trip to Ghana, and I still have more questions for you.

Wilson: Sure, but the reason why this is relevant before I forget it is that because we did go to Ghana and we lived in Ghana, we were able to save up enough money so that when we came back we were able to buy a house. This house is the house we bought. We expanded it a lot but you know this is the house we bought for $40,000 at the time.
Wilmot: I think you are a big time wheeler dealer, that’s good. [laughs]

Wilson: [Laughing] Well, that was the smartest thing I ever did—we ever did. But getting back now to the Berkeley thing.

Wilmot: Okay, well thank you. I guess I’m going to ask you a couple things. First is, you mentioned that you kind of stipulated that you needed to have conversations with other black faculty at UC Berkeley so you talked to someone in literature and you spoke to Troy in sociology. It sounds like what they told you made you feel like you felt comfortable coming here with your family.

Wilson: Oh yes, I did. First place, it would have taken a lot to dissuade me, you know? I just wanted verification that it was a solid and manageable place to live in. I mean, the campus and the history of the campus and all that was interesting and exciting. The faculty and the music department were among the top scholars in the world. It’s strange when you are young professor. At the time I was probably, what? Probably thirty? How old was I then? I was around thirty, thirty-one something like that. And I came here, and to be talking to people whom you had read about, who had written books you had studied in graduate school and undergraduate school, it was quite heady, you know? There were eminent composers here as well and that was really very—. So I said, “This is the place to be,” from that point of view, from a professional point of view.

Then, of course there was the physical beauty of Northern California which I found—this is perfect. I mean, the sun. People’s skin looked better. I mean, everything looked healthier.

Wilmot: Coming from Ohio.

Wilson: Yes, not the dull overcast that you often have in Ohio for a long period of the year. Ohio is also beautiful too, in the spring, but then you’ve got that winter. End of the fall until the beginning of spring it’s kind of dull, overcast, you never see sun and so forth. I didn’t think about it when I was there but when I came here, it must have been in the spring, and in Ohio it was still gray and dark and things hadn’t started. Here, it was bright and sunny and people were out sunning and people were running around having a great time. And then the diversity of the people, I was impressed. The community that had not the extraordinarily rare Asian person that you met, but many, many Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, not to mention Cambodian, Vietnamese and a whole range of other people that you find. I found that very interesting, very interesting. And then even African American people. Oakland, for example. I didn’t realize this then but I subsequently came to realize that Oakland had one of the largest Black, middle class communities in the world.

Wilmot: Oakland did?
Wilson: Oakland did and does. It was very interesting. And San Francisco’s unique architecture, exciting places, a lot going on. Everything from the jazz that’s there, to the symphony, to the museums, to the opera. It was just everything. Really, a lot of different things that you wanted to have access to were there. So it was exciting, you know. It seemed a real hip place to live.

Wilmot: So the stories of the politics that were unfolding on campus didn’t dissuade you at all?

Wilson: No, no, because that seemed natural. As a matter of fact, it was exciting to know that, “Okay you got some people who care about some of the issues that you care about.” There were some attitudes and some ideological positions I didn’t agree with but the general thrust I did agree with. So that was fine, so that was good. I found out enough to know that there were other people like me, and unlike at Oberlin where I was at the age of thirty and probably the senior—well I wasn’t the senior, because there was a black professor who had been there for twenty years—but he was really not that involved in that kind of thing at that point. I was sort of the senior one of the people who were the activists. And since I was a regular faculty member, and since my appointment preceded the consciousness about “lets find people,” I was seen as part of, of at least being accepted by the establishment. So, I wasn’t brought in to work exclusively with black students about this or to teach African American studies. When I got there, and it wasn’t there, I decided we ought to teach this and I began to do it. So I was unique in doing it. I happened to be in the right place at the right time. It has more to do with the tenor of the times than it has to do with me. It has to do with taking advantage of it, in the sense of shaping it in a certain direction. So that was exciting and heady. And I became a person who liked to bring in other people here. I mentioned Oliver Jackson, the painter, and, what’s his name? A couple of other people. It’ll come back to me.

Wilmot: Perhaps when we get back to it later.

Wilson: Eugene Redmond, the writer. Because we brought Eugene Redmond first, then Redmond who had worked at Illinois then suggested Oliver Jackson. No, actually we brought Bill Davis first. I think we talked about that before. Bill Davis came in as a counselor and had worked in the experiment in higher education at Southern Illinois University, SIU University, and he came to Oberlin as a counselor. He was the one that suggested Eugene Redmond, and then we brought Oliver Jackson. That was the group of black, mainly black male faculty, who constituted the core group of faculty that instituted the Black Studies program at Oberlin, initially. Okay. So I was the senior one—

Wilmot: We did talk about that, that was at Oberlin. We definitely talked about this.

Wilson: Right, right, exactly. Then coming to Berkeley, there were people that had been here, like Wade Ellis had at Oberlin, and there were people who also
were my age and had started and had also been here a couple, three or four years before I came. But it was rare. But then at that point I was still part of the vanguard of the group, because it turned out as a direct reaction to some of the things that happened in the late sixties, a relatively large number of faculty, black faculty, came to Berkeley in 1970, 1971, or 1969. And that included people like Bill Shack and so forth, and Ray O’Neil Collins and Russ Ellis. Troy had been there a little bit earlier, but Russ Ellis and a group of us.

We all knew each other, and that was good because in the absence of us establishing a kind of an association, and then establishing a group of black faculty that would meet regularly and talk about strategy, that ultimately helped to establish a Faculty Assistant for an Affirmative Action position, which was a formal position that advised the chancellor and the vice chancellor on these issues. It began to make some kind of changes to the systemic problems that we had in the institution.

Wilmot: We’re going to get into that. Did you know about the class that was taught in the sociology department where Eldridge Cleaver was going on? Did you hear about that? That was in the year 1969, before you came.

Wilson: No, I mean I probably heard about it, but ‘69 I was dealing with things at Oberlin.

Wilmot: Also I understand at that time that there was a divide between ethnic studies and black studies, so we can talk about whatever—

Wilson: That happened a little bit later. What happened was that in the sixties all across the country, Oakland was among the vanguards, but across the country and ultimately, I guess, Berkeley and San Francisco State—there were certain kinds of ideological clashes. The most important that was played out writ large had to do with the clash between the people who were viewed as assimilationists—and you’re familiar with this, you know the assimilationists, primarily the NAACP, the center, the old guard who had fought historically in the court for advancement and equal rights and so forth, who felt “We should do it, but that we should do it in a legal way,” on one hand, on one axis, and then the other extreme, there was the position articulated by Malcolm X, “By any means necessary.” You had Roy Wilkins but you also had the young
Martin Luther King coming to the fore, brilliant orator and so forth. So you had those ideas. Now Martin Luther King and Roy Wilkins, head of the NAACP, were seen as having approached a way using peaceful demonstrations and so forth but not turning back in the face of everything to try to change—they would use these tactics to try to do it. Malcolm X said, “No, we gotta fight back. You don’t turn the other cheek. You don’t use these kinds of tactics. Those older tactics were good initially, but now you’ve got to fight back.” So you have those two lines. Then you have, as a reflection of that, you have the ideological wars fought between people who considered themselves black cultural nationalists and those people who considered themselves revolutionary nationalists. Cultural nationalists are those people who think black is beautiful, who have to look inside—you’ve got a whole range from serious writers and poets to James Brown, which comes a little bit later, but still, James Brown “I’m black and proud”, articulating it and breaking it down for the masses. So you have that viewpoint is going on a number of different levels. The other side you have the revolutionary nationalists who view things from an economic analysis and see things as a reflection of larger economic problems and therefore say, “It’s not about racism as much as it is about class and culture and the economic position of the United States.” So you have that position being articulated by the Black Panthers. You have different views of this, but then at certain points people began fighting one another.

The way it played out in the university is this: how do you or what do you view the university as? Some people view the university as simply an extension of the capitalist mentality, a place that prepares people to work in a capitalist system and exploits the underclass, to use the simplistic statement of it. Other people view the university as a reservoir of culture and knowledge and a place that helps to define public attitudes, and so they say this whole idea about culture is extremely important. The definition of what is important to study, how you study it, why it’s valuable, is set law to by institutions of higher learning. Since people of color aren’t part of that, we’ve got a serious problem and we have to address that. We have to articulate ourselves our views of ourselves. The history, the story of African American people has to be told by African American people, or at least that perspective has to be brought in. It can be told by anybody but the perspective that one brings from the inside is really extremely important and not to have that is to give a distorted view.

So the cultural nationalists were saying, “Let’s look inward, let’s tie ourselves to the black cultural history” and the black cultural history meant looking inward to the African tradition, so going back to Africa, looking at Africa for cultural ideas and so forth to understand the African American presence. There were some historical battles and issues that had to go back to the forties and has to do whether one believes in the cultural tabula rasa notion. That is a notion that African American culture is a culture that exists solely in the United States, that everything that developed out of African culture was
erased by the vestiges of slavery, by the cruel scourge of slavery and the
vestiges of slavery. Everything that’s new in this African American culture
comes out of the American experience and it stopped when Africans got here
and started over anew. You had famous ideological battles, intellectual battles
being fought by E. Franklin Frazier on one hand and W.E.B. DuBois on the
other hand. So you had these kinds of issues going on. So all of this was being
played out on different levels.

In the university, the most direct thing had to do with once people said,
“Okay, Black Studies, what do we do?” There were different positions. The
revolutionary nationalists said, “Well, you know, what we should do if this is
a revolution, we’ve got to take over that institution, we’ve got to take over that
every part and everything is in service of the revolution. So Black Studies
should only exist as a function of the larger revolution.” So if you’re in a
revolution, then the heck with what happened with the history and the past, we
can analyze it from a Marxist point of view, and we should analyze it from a
Marxist point of view, but anything that does not contribute directly to the
ultimate goal, which is the overthrow of the current system—revolution, tear
down the capitalist system—anything that doesn’t do that is meaningless.

Other people take another position and say, “Well, it is important to
understand, to let the perspectives of people of African descent look at history
from their perspective and engage in this broader discussion about what is
America? How does it exist?” So we have to look back and we have to
redefine what it means from a perspective of African Americans. The
revolutionary side is fine, but it does not exist as a revolution, it exists as a
marketplace of ideas. So if you go in—what you’re really talking about is
indoctrination. If you say you’re going to teach what’s right as you call it—so
you’re going to impose your ideas on everybody and they’re saying that’s
inimical to the best interests not only of the university, but our interests,
because just as we can impose it, somebody else can come in tomorrow and
impose. Even though the university aspires to—even though the university has
never completely lived up to its aspirations, just as the nation has never lived
up to its aspirations, those aspirations are still valuable and should be
recognized and should be made to exist, made a reality to the best the degree
that we can.

So those were the philosophical arguments and the issues that were going on.
One saw the University as a means to and end; and another view saw the
university as a means by which you ultimately have control, you ultimately
have an impact, but you have to recognize the university for what it is, what it
aspires to be—not necessarily what it is, but what it aspires to be. And you
should use that and make it a reality. So you have those kinds of positions.

Now my personal position was clearly on the latter side: you should make the
University something that it should be, not what it has been, but what it
aspires to be. Therefore, you can deal and you should be able to deal on an
intellectual terms with the reality of the African American experience. The
reason why it’s not there is because people didn’t take it seriously, but we as African American people have a responsibility to take it seriously. And other people, anybody who wants to participate in that discussion, can certainly be empowered to do so. It’s that position as opposed to the other position: “We can’t, you can’t trust anybody else and this idea of talking about ideals is to buy into a capitalist viewpoint anyway and so forth; so you have to impose what you think; you have to really do a revolution. Tear it down, burn it down before we can build it up again.” That’s really the crux of the matter and that was being played out on a number of different levels all through the period and still exists.

Wilmot: Sure. Were there people who were attached to these that you could say who they were or—?

Wilson: Oh, clearly. Clearly, the Black Panthers, Eldridge Cleaver, you know who represented the Black Panthers at the time—

Wilmot: On campus, in particular?

Wilson: Yeah, I mean in terms of—remember, Oakland, this is it. The Black Panther newspaper was there. Every edition had another article, another editorial saying exactly what I just articulated. The Black Muslims had their own twist on it, and that was also going on. And you had a lot of things in between. So when people started talking about Black Studies, and this idea was, “We have to be sensitive and responsive to the community” was part of the theme, and part of the problem because people were saying, “What is a community?” and “If we’re responsive to the community, then we ought to have our schools take the money from the University, have the schools in the community. And if we’re responsive to the community, the issues that the community thinks are important ought to be foremost in the plans of the university.” There were different ideas about that: take over the whole thing, and just use it for the community to another thing of, “Well, it’s a university, we ought to develop ideas; we ought to develop critical thought, et cetera, and we ought to develop a meaningful knowledge base about the culture.” We can also—it’s not either/or—we can also have a cultural outreach. We can sort of take what we have learned and can take it out to the community so that we can develop a sense of pride, a sense of awareness, a sense of history, all of which are very important not only in the Ivory Tower in the university but in the day-to-day lives of the people not fortunate enough to be at the University.

So that’s where the outreach idea, which still exists, was a part of it. It was part of, “we should take what we have and we shall disseminate it to the community and we should also be informed by the ideas going on in the community. We shouldn’t presume a superior intelligence or a superior view simply because we come from the university.” But at the same time there’s certain basic things that you need to learn: I mean science is science and
computers are computers. [chuckles] But you can use those tools in any way you want to use them. So those were some of the kinds of arguments.

Music and the arts were central to that, because if you’re talking about content, if you’re talking about American culture, if you talk about American music: Where does it come from? What are the unique factors that make it this music? Why is it this way? Those are a lot of fundamental questions that really needed to be addressed in a systematic way. And the same thing’s true about literature, about art, about painting and so forth. All of this becomes an important part.

Wilmot: From your perspective over in the music department, was the administration ready to make room for a Black studies department?

Wilson: Well, in the music department. Within the music department. When I came and I said I want to teach a course on African American music, fine, you know. There was no, at least no outward resistance to that idea. Politically it probably wasn’t—even though some people intellectually or ideologically may have had some questions about that, nobody would voice it in that particular context. People who did voice anything said, “Fine, you should do that.” But it’s one thing to say, “Okay, you can teach a course,” but it’s another thing to say okay, now, if you’re having music, and all the music that’s ever performed under the sanction of the music department is music that derives from Western European culture, then you’ve got a problem, unless people are responsive to people expanding what this music is that you do. So my career over the last thirty years has been getting the institution, specifically the music department, and further the larger institution to expand that definition of what consists of music.

What happened is that shortly after I came here I realized that though I could talk about music, and my research has really—I had begun to develop a methodology and an approach to do this which I thought was meaningful and was beginning to yield some positive results—but there had to also be a forum for the performance for this music. And that meant that we had to have various performance groups. So early on, after I had come back from Africa, we really have to have some African music that’s part of this campus. I was able to— because when I lived in Africa I met C.K. [ ] who was from a family of musicians and who was also associated with the institute of African Studies at the University of Ghana. Because I met him and I talked to him, I said, “C.K., it would be great if we could get you to come to the United States.” He was interested and he was single at the time and was interested in actually coming, so I managed to work it out for him to come. That was a major thing that I think happened because once we brought C.K., and C.K then began to—the way the music department worked, it was complicated because the music department didn’t have full-time people who taught performance. The music department was and is the department that focuses on the cognitive side of music. And the assumption was that there will be
performance—not that there’s not already, because it is music and it does exist in time—so there’s always a lot of music there, there’s a big concert hall there and people do perform in the conference hall because there’s an orchestra, there’s a chorus, there’s a chamber chorus, there was a Caladium music that did early music from the sixteenth, from before the seventeenth century, that whole range of music, European music and so forth. There was performance, and there were some outstanding performers who were part of that, but the faculty didn’t consist of performers. The only performers in the faculty were the conductors in the orchestra and the conductor of the chorus. There were many performers who come in to teach private lessons and kids study with them, but the faculty, the full-time faculty, were people involved either in composition or musicology.

It’s the old division in music that happened in Europe years ago where in the universities you had the cognitive side of music: composition, musicology (the historical study of music), and in the conservatories, you have the performance of music. That’s a division that existed in European music for years and when they established universities in the United States, many of the oldest universities maintained that division. So you have separate self-standing conservatories, like San Francisco or Julliard or Oberlin or Eastman School of Music. Then you have the school of music that tries to put the cognitive side and the performance side together. So you have those two kinds of divisions. Berkeley chose that feeling that, “We’d better focus on this and be very good at this because we can’t do everything,” and because there were some institutions, especially state institutions, that “tried to do everything” school of music, and they did neither one very well, so you had those problems.

At any rate, that model was changing and what I was to suggest that we should do that, so we were able to do that. We brought C.K. as a lecturer which was the way the University had dealt with performers anyway, whether you’re teaching piano or flute or whatever, if you were not a full-time professor, part-time professor, part-time lecturer. Lecturers get security of employment and so forth and so on, and also having C.K have this base here, I knew that eventually as a performer, he would develop and work and do his own thing which is exactly what he did. So he came here, I tried to get him to come when I was there from 1971 to 1972. I managed to bring C.K I think it was in January of 1973. So he came in ‘73 and he’s been here ever since. So he built the African Music Ensemble which has been a staple not only at the university, but in the community because then he also started—he had the university ensemble which was a class and so forth. But he also had a community ensemble and he would take some of the best students from the class and they would work in this professional ensemble and so it’s worked out for him and it’s worked out for the community. So all of that was, I think pivotal.
Wilmot: Okay, let’s take a break while I just change the disk. There’s so much you’ve said.

[interview interruption]

Wilmot: I guess a question I wanted to ask you is, when you were kind of describing the effort that you put into the broadening of the department’s understanding of basically what was legitimate to teach, you used this phrase “I spent thirty years working at this,” and I wanted to ask you if that in any way pulled you away from some of your creative work.

Wilson: I don’t think so. I think that my interest in scholarship and particularly scholarship in African American music also informs what I do as a creative artist. Not necessarily on a one-to-one relationship, that is because I studied African music and the history of African American music doesn’t necessarily mean that I consciously draw upon that when I do my work as a creative artist. But I think the pleasure that that gives me and the understanding that that gives me does reflect positively on what I do as a creative artist. Because I feel I’ve done something important and I’ve developed my understanding there, it makes me feel better, and it makes me feel more positive about what I’m doing. So it’s not a direct one to one correspondence, but it’s a general sort of positive feeling that I have about what I do and that gives me more confidence, gives me more self-assurance, so it redounds what I do creatively. I don’t see it as an either/or, I see it as part of a holistic kind of a thing that I do. I’m the kind of person that likes to deal with ideas, I’m the kind of person who likes to create new ideas. All of this is something that has worked positively toward what I aspire for.

Wilmot: The reason why I ask that question is because when you said that you had worked for thirty years basically to expand the canon. The way that I understand that is that way of institutional transformation which involves changing other individuals’ perceptions, and that’s why I asked that question because it seemed to me to be such labor intensive work.

Wilson: But I think that’s part of a larger question which you didn’t ask, but which I think is related to that, and that is, I’m the kind of person that has been involved in multiple enterprises: scholarship, the creative work, the administration work. I’m the kind of person that has spent a lot of time on a number of different committees, I’ve done university administration, some of it quite distant from what my focus is as a creative artist or even as a scholar. I thrive on that kind of thing and I’m the kind of person that needs different kinds of stimulation, intellectual stimulation and a wide range of things. Because I’ve been able to do that, I thrive in a university. I have composer friends who can’t understand, “How can you work in a university? You get up in the morning, you go to teach some class, you’ve got to go to a meeting. How’d you do that for over thirty years and at the same time and keep your eye focused on writing music?” I never saw it as a problem. I saw it
as something that I did. I’m the kind of person who always did this and did that at the same time. It’s all part of my makeup.

I also recognize that one of the reasons that I did retire was because as I get older your sense of mortality certainly comes sharper into focus and then you say, “Now I’ve got to make some choices.” I’ve done things as multiple enterprises, but I’ve done them serially. But now that I look at the window and it’s not as open or it’s not as long as it was twenty years ago or ten years ago. I then now have to make some serious choices, and so I wake up in the morning and I’m not going to do fifteen things before I sit down and try to write some music. I wake up in the morning and say, “Okay, I still have ten things to do but not thirty things to do.” My energies are not the same that they were twenty-five years ago so I can focus on things now. But still I need that stimulation because I still do a lot of other things that—I recognize its part of me that’s having these multitasks that you have to balance.

Wilmot: When you came to Berkeley, did you come on as an assistant professor?

Wilson: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative noise]

Wilmot: In your interview was there a discussion of the schedule for becoming a full professor, or how—?

Wilson: In those days, no. In those days people sort of assumed that you’re part of the university’s academic ladder. When somebody gives you a salary scale and it says, “This is where you are now. The average number of years in this step of assistant professorship is two or three or whatever and then as you move up after two or three years, certainly after six years, you are going to come up for tenure.” Now, in my particular case, remember I had already taught at Oberlin for four years and so I was very, very much socialized into the academic calendar and the academic calendar for advancement. I knew when I came here that, “Look, I’m not going to start as a beginning assistant professor, I’ve already done that for Oberlin for four years.” As a matter of fact, at Oberlin I was up for tenure the next year. So coming to Berkeley meant that I started the calendar but not at the very beginning again. The understanding was that “after two years I want to be reviewed for tenure, because I’ve already worked for four years, or five years at Oberlin. I understand that you have to look at me and you have to look at me in the Berkeley community and I’ve got to prove myself here, but I’m not going to start over from the beginning again.” They understood that and thought that was reasonable and at the end of two years I was reviewed for tenure.

Wilmot: When you returned from Ghana?

Wilson: When I returned from Ghana. Fortunately, I was glad I had taken that position because I had just won a Guggenheim fellowship, and that was quite prestigious. I’d won the fellowship; in 1970, I got a commission from the
Boston Symphony to do a piece for the Tanglewood. So everything was coming together, the Guggenheim Fellowship, the thing for Tanglewood, and because I was smart enough to say, “Look, I want to be reviewed in 1971 or 1972.” Fine, I was reviewed in 1972 because I came up for tenure then and I made it because things had worked out very well for my career. I was very confident about myself professionally because I knew where I was relative to my colleagues in the field, and so I knew that things were going to work out, and they did work out, and so it was fine.

Wilmot: In negotiating the tenure process, did colleagues advise you or guide you or was it that kind of a situation?

Wilson: Well, a little bit, a little bit. But, it was fairly clear to me that things had been going well for me. I was writing a lot of music; I was getting performances; I had won a couple of prizes and so forth, early on the international thing in electronic music. Then, most recently the Guggenheim, which was, you know, the great plum. The thing about the Guggenheim that I loved so much wasn’t only the prestige. I realized the prestige of it but I realized even more importantly the opportunity it afforded me to spend a year so I could really focus on writing on music and focus on studying African music. What happened was that the other rewards came as a result of that so it wasn’t a problem. Also, I was well socialized into the University because I’d taught at Oberlin for four years. So that part was clear.

Wilmot: I understand that tenure at Berkeley is really different than tenure at places like Yale or Harvard or where only 5% of assistant professors then go on to become full professors whereas at Berkeley, it’s kind of a different situation.

Wilson: It’s very different, yeah. I don’t know so much about Yale, but certainly that was the view at Harvard. If you came in as an assistant professor, you were not going to get tenure. You would have the prestige of having taught at Harvard, which you could then parlay into another position, but after six years you were gone. Nobody came from assistant professor at Harvard to become a full professor. If you wanted to be a full professor at Harvard, you’d better come in as a full professor, already. So that was very clear. Yale, I think, was different and I think it also depended on whether or not you were in the department or the school of music. Yale had both. I don’t even know if they had something itinerant at Yale in the school of music. It was some other kind of position where you were appointed year after year after year. But that was the exception; the more common kind of situation was the situation that I obtained at Berkeley where you are appointed as an assistant professor, they are very selective in the first place, and then you come up for tenure sometime during the course of that period. Either your negotiate something initially, as I did, saying that I don’t want to start from the beginning and I want you to review me at the end of two years and I think that my record will stand up, will be strong enough so that it will pass the review. Most institutions have something like that. But most people who start at these institutions usually try
to get there either right after their degree or within the first couple of years of their teaching so that they can do that. I was fortunate that I was coming from Oberlin and I had a record there and I was up for tenure at Oberlin then. So I said, “Look, I’m willing to take it a couple more years, but nothing beyond that.” They said, “Okay, if you want to do that, fine. Sink or swim.” I said, “Fine, that’s okay. with me,” but I was confident that things would work out for me. So I was bold at that time, but at that time I felt like I could afford to do so.

Wilmot: You also had your family, so it sounds like you were thinking that this was going to be your place.

Wilson: I don’t know what I would have done if I hadn’t made it and if things hadn’t worked out for me. I probably would have gone somewhere else. But I didn’t even consider that as a possibility, I was so supremely confident in my abilities and what I was able to do, because things were working well for me, very well. That was the way it was at that point.

Wilmot: I want to turn now to your time in Ghana.

Wilson: Sure.

Wilmot: When you won the Guggenheim award, did you know at that time that you would go to Ghana and do some work there?

Wilson: What I knew was that I could spend the year writing music. I also knew that when I was filling out the application—because when I filled out the application I wasn’t completely aware of all of these travel possibilities. They said, “If you’re going to travel, if you want to travel, please indicate what your travel plans are and where you want to go.” It was at that point that I said, “Oh, that would be great.” Most American composer who apply for the Guggenheim and had this travel plan really wanted to go to Europe. And I said, “I’m really not that interested in going to Europe. It would be great to go to Europe, and I’d love to go, but that’s not the main place I want to go. I really want to go to Africa because I really want to study music in Africa,” and I wanted to spend some time there. Not just some vague thing, “Oh, I want to go to Africa,” the tourist kind of thing, go to Africa for a couple of months or for a couple of weeks and shop and spend money and so that. That’s nice, too—I’m not denigrating that—because I think it’s a marvelous experience for anybody to go. But, I wanted to go and I really wanted to study the music; I wanted to study the language; I wanted to understand the culture in a much more thorough way and I knew that took time. And so I said this will afford me an opportunity to do that. So it was only when that Guggenheim application came and they said, “We will pay for you to go and your travel expenses to go” that I said, “Oh, that’s great.” But I still had a problem. Because they would pay for my travel expenses, but they wouldn’t pay for my wife and two children because, you know, they aren’t in the
business of funding whole families to go. So I had to figure out another way for that. But that came later on.

When the Guggenheim Fellowship came and said, “We’ll pay not only for your salary but we’ll also pay for you to travel and go to Ghana,” and it was a couple of thousands of dollars roundtrip to go, that was a lot of money. You quadruple that, and that’s even more money, so I said, “Okay, how do I figure that out?” It happened at that time that Berkeley was going to initiate a summer program for students to go to Africa in 1970, and it was a summer study abroad issue. I said, “Oh, that’s great,” and they were looking for a director. I said, “Great.” So I came over and said, “I’ve never been to Africa, but I would really like to go and I would like to become an applicant for that position. And then, also, in exchange for that, if you can arrange for my family to have their airfare paid, that would be a great kind of thing.” I knew that when you worked out those kinds of situations that often the airlines would give you a couple of airfares free. I already had money, Guggenheim was going to pay for me. But then if I could get the money for my wife and kids, it would be worth the work that I had to do.

So they said, “Okay, fine, we’ll do that, we’ll try to do that.” Because they had two airfares that they could do that, and then the other airfare they would pay and that would be compensation for the work that I did for part of the time. Anyway, I worked out a deal. And as it turned out they didn’t have that many applicants. I thought they’d have applicants for all over the place, but there are not that many people that want to go to Africa and be director for this program and hence be responsible for these eighteen to twenty students from Berkeley who’ve got to suffer culture shock and all that stuff. It was perfect for me and allowed for my family to go and paved the way for them. So it worked out. I became the director of the program. That meant being responsible for the kids and a lot of administrative work, but that was fine.

Wilmot: Were there any crises while you were there, with the students?

Wilson: Oh, there were crises all the time, there were crises all the time, but they were exciting crises. Part of it had to do with just culture shock, that kids going to Africa—living in the third world for the first time, there’s a time and space difference that takes place there. It’s how you deal with adversity. So we had to deal, had to adjust, to deal with differences in time and space and so forth. That meant that people were having culture shock at one point or another and I had to deal with it. That was fine, you know. I’m the kind of person that gets along with most people, and it was exciting to do it and the rewards were great. So we had many crises from the time the plane landed in Africa.

But of course, in those days, you didn’t fly directly from New York or from California to Africa; we flew from San Francisco to London and then once we got to London, we got a plane to Africa, so that meant that we had to stay over in London. And one student, an older woman—she was older than me, I was
in my early thirties then and she must have been forty, something like that, and she was among the students, she had reentered school—but she had never traveled much outside of California and certainly had never traveled to Europe. So she gets lost in London one day. She was going with a group of kids and they jumped on a train and they left her and she’s standing in the street crying because she’s lost and doesn’t know how to get back. Somebody eventually found her, found her—

Wilmot: She was disoriented.

Wilson: She was disoriented, she didn’t know exactly where to go. The telephone were complicated in London, too, coming from the United States in 1972. And the seventies style with all the bright colors and all that—

Wilmot: [laughs] You’re like, “It was disorienting for people.”

Wilson: It was just disorienting for her. I mean, other people could have done it, but she was not accustomed to doing that kind of thing and it was difficult for her.

Wilmot: Were you based in Accra?

Wilson: Yes, we went to Accra. That was the one crisis that happened in London, but then when we go to Accra, we get off the plane, it’s the middle of the night, everybody’s tired. We finally landed successfully in Accra—I think this was Ghana airlines, too—we get there, and then we go through customs. Well, customs in Ghana is complicated. Because people are accustomed to being dashed, you know you give a little extra money. Even though we had had orientation and all of that by some Ghanaian students and so forth, people who are from the country, indigenous people don’t want to tell the whole story the whole time, so nobody told that you have to dash people, you have to bribe people, you have to give them a little bit to get off until we were faced with it. I didn’t quite understand what was going on.

Twenty-some students, they were—what was the break down—I guess there were about three or four Asians, about ten African American and I guess about eight Caucasians. So it was a mixed group, but people were pretty compatible, in general. But there were some special characters among the group. There was one guy whose name I forget, who carried a pole with him, and he stood up like he was some kind of martial artist, and he would stand there. He was very buff, very built, and he would stand up and hold it—he was baldheaded, too—this was in 1972 when it wasn’t—I think he was naturally bald-headed, but he—he carried this big cane and he stood up.

“What’s wrong with this guy? Why does he always do that?” He didn’t last very long; he claimed that there was some personal problem he had so he left after about two weeks. I don’t think he planned to be there the whole time. But anyway, really strange looking.
There was an Asian guy who was short, his name was [Alex Dia?]. Very interesting guy, he wore Japanese-like clothes, sort of a white kimono—wasn’t a kimono, but it was sort of quasi traditional dress. He had very long hair. He was kind of a jolly little guy, jumping around and friendly with everybody. But because he looked different, wherever we went, everybody was looking at him. Because he had this long hair and he looked like a Native American, but Asian, he clearly was Asian and so forth. And it was a sort of a motley different crew. The styles that people were dressing, all the way from the hip styles of the seventies to the—

Wilmot: Sounds like there was a different kind of identity politics or identity styles.

Wilson: Exactly, exactly. Most of the kids had big Afros and that kind of stuff. Anyway, when we got there the guards were—the first thing to strike Americans, as soon you hit Africa you see people with machine guns, like you see now at American airports, people with guns, machine guns and rifles and things. In an airport in 1970 in the United States and Europe, you didn’t see that, you just didn’t see people with military weapons. So that was a major thing that got people’s attention. Then, in searching everybody’s suitcases, the guy was taking an inordinate amount of time. Everybody was exhausted. Finally my assistant, who was this Ghanaian student who was at Berkeley came up and sort of had to say, “I hate to tell you this, I’m embarrassed to tell you this, but we’re going to have to dash this guy some money or we’re going to be here a long time.” I said, “Look, dashing what?” My question was “How much?” He said, “Oh, about ten cedis.” Cedis were supposed to be the equivalent to a dollar and that was the official rate. The unofficial rate was about seventy cent, eighty cent to a dollar. Eighty cent of pesewas was the equivalent of one dollar and so forth, or a hundred and twenty cedis, pesewas were equivalent to one dollar. Anyway I said, “Look, okay fine, dash him ten, twenty dollars, whatever it takes,” and he did and I just wrote down in the table, “We gave the guy a tip or whatever because we had to get out of there,” because our bus was waiting.

Wilmot: I love “dash” as a verb.

Wilson: Yeah, dash. You must dash something.

Wilmot: Sounds like such a marvelous opportunity. And I’m wondering, when you came to Accra, what were your goals for your work there? What did you imagine that you could get from this opportunity?

Wilson: My goals were to find out as much about the culture as I could, and as much specifically about the music. How is the music organized? I had done some preliminary studies and read some books about it, but at the time there were only maybe—there were articles that people had written about specific regions, but a general overarching, good view of the role of music in society and the structure of music, how it was put together—improvisation happens,
but what are the constraints when improvisation happens? How does it work? What are the principles that inform African music and how do they impact the principles that form African American music? Obviously there is a relationship, but what is the nature of the relationship? Things change over time, and anybody who’s heard African music and African American music can clearly hear some similarities, but there are also important differences. What is the nature of those differences? What is the nature of those principles of organization, continuity? And what is being maintained and what is not being maintained?

Eventually I began to develop some conceptual frameworks that I thought made some sense in terms of approaching this study. I hoped to try to understand how music exists and how did it function in the culture. And how is that similar to music in Western cultures as I knew it and American culture as I knew it, as I think I knew it a little bit better. And how is it different? Why is it that the tradition of African American music influences popular American music so profoundly and continues to do so? So answering those wider questions really was part of my quest.

Wilmot: That’s so amazing, too, when you talk about looking for contexts for culture production and then when I think also about the work that you did in electronic music I just think it is so interesting how you pursued both of those.

Wilson: It was, you know, very challenging at that time and very exciting at that time. And I also wanted to be cool. [laughs] So we were having a good time, Elouise and I and the kids. It was great, it was good.

Wilmot: Where did you live?

Wilson: We lived, we lived—you’ve been to Accra?

Wilmot: I have not.

Wilson: Okay, the University of Accra is a major capitol, center on the coast. The university is seven miles outside of Accra in a little city called Legon, as a matter of fact that’s where the campus is. The whole model for the campus was as part of the British university, because it was, of course, a British colony. So the University of Ghana initially was built as a branch of the University of London. And it was there as a place in Africa where the British population who lived there could go. They’d go to the University of London. As a matter of fact, even after it became the University of Ghana, in order to verify the quality, there were exams and the exams would be sent to Britain to be graded there, so it had the standard of the University of London. Because even when it first became Ghana, it was not the University of Ghana, it was still the University of London, because it was built by the University of London. And it was for the British colonists and the elite Ghanaians who could qualify to go there. So, it was a very elitist institution, beautiful campus
in the great days, of course. Of course, after many years and after some coups and after some problems, it had some real problems, but it’s just physically beautiful and well-constructed and well-designed. Then when [Kwame] Nkrumah became Prime Minister of Ghana, he established the Institute of African Culture to both study and preserve to the degree that it was appropriate, aspects of traditional culture. So what the institute did was to go out and document traditional festivals. Throughout Ghana and all the ethnic groups, there are important festivals that occur in the calendar year. So the university would send out a video crew, a camera crew, a sound crew to go and record this.

Wilmot: Did you participate in this?

Wilson: Well, I had the option as a visiting scholar. I would tag along with the crew or drive after them. They’d go and stay for the main days of the main events. What I liked to do is go sometimes before they got there to do my own preliminary research and find out the history of this festival, why did it occur at this particular time, what was going to happen. Then the university people would come and they’d show on television—they had the festival of—a specific festival that was being held at a particular time in this village, and they would show what happened there and it would be shown on television. I’d go before then and I’d talk to people and I’d record music and I’d try to—. I had a Super Eight video camera and I would take Super Eight video and then when I came back I’d show it to my classes. I used those films for years! For much of the thirty years. Since I went back and forth many times, I had updates that I would do. It was really some interesting stuff.

I was there, for example, during the enstoolment of the Asanti hini. The major ethnic group in Ghana are the Asanti people, or the Anglicized version, the Ashanti people. The head or the chief is called the “hini,” or head person. So the Asanti hini was the paramount chief of all the Asanti people, and that’s the largest in the dominant culture there. These are the Asanti people or the Ashanti people. Usually the Asanti hini was a very, very powerful person and usually he was a very well educated person and, of course, the elders would decide who this person was going to be. Actually, it was a matrilineal kind of inheritance so that one would inherit one’s uncle, that is, one’s sister’s—the sister of the current king’s children would inherit their uncle. Because you know who the mother was, you don’t always know who the father was, but you certainly know who the mother was. That’s what happens in a matrilineal kind of inheritance so that it’s not the father and the son, it’s the mother’s son, or the sister of the current king’s son is eligible.

Wilmot: But the mother was not.

Wilson: But the mother was not, no. It was certainly a male-dominated society. But! But it is done in a very interesting way: The person who would decide who was going to become the Asanti hini was not—you had to be eligible, you had
to be the son of the sister of the king, but the queen mother who was the sister of the king and her court who were women would decide who it was going to be. So that a woman couldn’t become king, but a woman was going to decide who was going to become king. That’s the way—it had to be a person who had the bloodline of the current king, his sister’s kids. But the sister and her court would decide which of her kids, which of her male kids would be one. It wasn’t necessarily oldest one or the youngest one, it was the one who they thought would be best suited for that.

Wilmot: Were you present for a transition of this sort?

Wilson: For the seating for that. The enstooling, I guess is the term that they used. Because the symbol of the governance resided in the stool. You know that stool that I have upstairs, that’s the traditional stool. Once you become a king, you sit on the stool. And so there’s a whole village that carves these very beautiful stools. They carve the stools. Then there’s a whole legend of the golden stool. It goes on and on, the whole legend, which I’ll talk about some other time.

Wilmot: Whoa, that sound like a movie!

Wilson: That’s right, the golden stool. It’s a very interesting story. But at any rate, the person who was enstooled had formally been the Ghanaian ambassador to Switzerland. These are the people who are the elite of their society. This was an Oxford-educated lawyer who was out serving the diplomatic corps. Somebody like that is appointed to be the Asanti hini, the paramount chief of all the Asanti people. It’s largely a diplomatic and a ceremonial role, but it also has some political ramifications as to who gets it and so forth and so on. It was very exciting, very interesting.

Wilmot: What did people make of you as this professor from America, from the United States who was always asking questions about music and wanting to film the dance and music. What did people make of you?

Wilson: Right. I think there had been, by then, by the time I get there in the seventies, there had been people who had been there as scholars, there were some people who had written books and so forth, so that they had seen scholars coming around from time to time, either people doing things like the National Geographic or anthropologists or people coming around to do that. There hadn’t been that many African Americans, so that was kind of interesting. And the fact that while I was at the Institute of African Studies, what we also did was to study the language. Because I could communicate, not fluently, but I could communicate basic things like “my name is,” “we are from.”

And this was an English-speaking country in the sense that Nkrumah had also instituted universal education, which was novel in Africa at the time, and since English was the basic language of education, then many people, even the
small villages, the young people who went to school could speak some English. That was the major language of commerce and everything else. There were a lot of different other languages that they learned, that they naturally knew. So the fact that I studied ‘twi,’ which is one of the hardest words to say—‘t-w-i’—which looks like ‘twee’ and it’s pronounced like ‘tchree,’ and that’s one of the hardest words to say. Also most African languages are tonal languages, they have three different tones so that if you say [E wa hanh?] [upward inflection on final syllable] it means something different than {E wah hanh?} [downward inflection on final syllable]. It goes up [E wah hanh, ewah hanh?] I’m exaggerating, it goes down. The pitches, even though the syllables and the pronunciation is the same, the pitches are different. If you have the wrong syllables it gives an entirely different meaning of the word. You had to learn that, which means that it is very difficult to learn. But we learned how to say basic things like “I am,” “I’m from,” “where are you from?,” “I want to,” “How do you get to?,” “Which direction?” Basic things you learn in any language. So the fact that I was out there attempting to communicate in the indigenous language endeared me greatly to the people. “Oh, this guy’s trying to speak the language and some of the things that he can say pretty well!” If you come in with a camera, especially out in a little village where people don’t have cameras, or if you come in with a tape recorder and people want to hear themselves on the tape recorder and everybody laughs because it’s not something they see every day. It was a marvelous experience. And everybody, people would say, “Where are you from?” Well, I’d say, ‘I’m from California, from the United States, from California.” They could tell by my accent.

But the other things is, in Africa, a lot of the people look just like us. There’s a whole range from extremely light-skinned people to extremely dark-skinned people. A lot of people you can tell, just like you see Africans and tell. But there’s some Africans that you can’t tell who they are, especially because of the coast; that is that the Europeans have been there for hundreds of years and they are people, whole groups of people, the Fanti people are the people that lived around the coast traditionally and they’re the people who carry the results of hundreds of years of racial intermixing, so you can’t just look at a person and tell absolutely what their ethnicity is.

Wilmot: Is that F-A-N-T-I?

Wilson: F-A-N-T-E. Fante, F-A-N-T-E, or sometimes spelled F-A-N-T-I. The Fanti people especially on the coast, or the Ga people, G-A people, who live on the coast as well. But I think more so with the Fante people than the Ga people who just look like African Americans. Then we were wearing African clothes most of the time because you get them, they were inexpensive and they were comfortable. So we wore African clothes. The first minute that you open your mouth people can tell. With Elouise, since she’s light-skinned, people assumed that she was something else. There certain terms they would say, what is it, there was a word for foreigner and there was a word for {krokro?} and that meant sort of red American. It meant that you were an American, but
you weren’t just a regular white American, you were something else. You’re a red-white American or a dark-white American or something like that. There were little words and after a while you got to hear what people were saying and then I could come back and say, “No, I’m an African.” I’d say, “I’m from this tribe, I’m from all these tribes.” I claimed, “I’m Ashanti, I’m Fante, I’m Ga. I can be anything I want, I’m all of it and something else, too.” And that was an interesting kind of—that would lead to discussions and so forth.

Wilmot: I can imagine. It must have been amazing.

Wilson: Very exciting, so we were able to spend a lot of time. You learn that there are certain other things—as I said differences in time and space. For example, when you go in to see somebody and say, “Hello, my name is Olly Wilson and I’m a professor from Berkeley and I’d like to record you doing this. I’d like to record who’s the best drummer around? Who’s the best musician? Who’s the best player who plays the bow?” One-stringed bowed instrument, you see that little instrument? [points] This is a toy copy of it, but one of the things that I was interested in was in northern Ghana, studying this instrument which was a duringa, it’s a one-stringed bowed instrument. So I would go into a town, I’d say, “Who do you consider the best players?” I made a little film about four different players and then did an assessment why is it that people consider this one player to be better than all the rest, you know. It’s an interesting instrument. It also is historically an interesting instrument because the kind of music that they play is music of commentary. The texts that they make up talk about stories that happened that day and so forth. It’s interesting. And the relationship of the singer and the instrument is akin to some of the kinds of things that later develop, in different ways, in both the Caribbean and in South America, and in the United States. There are certain aspects of what we think of as blues, or certainly the music that predates blues, that has some of those same qualities. Now, I’m not saying this is blues; it’s not blues, but it’s shares some basic qualities that we associate with blues and so forth. A number of interesting things that we were able to explore there. I could talk about that forever, so—

Wilmot: It’s good, it’s actually really amazing. You have talked about it a little bit in the interview with Yale. You talked a little bit about that instrument. I’m wondering two questions I think: The first one is just with whom did you work with most closely while you were there? Was that C.K. [ ]?

Wilson: C.K. [ ], I met C.K there, but C.K was working—At that time, at the Institute of African Studies, they had a resident ensemble which was the National Music and Dance Troupe of Ghana. C.K. was associated with that. The concept of putting that together—and this was all established by Kwabena Nketia [spells] who was the director of the Institute, and he also was a professor at UCLA. I knew him, he would come for half the year and spend time at UCLA. So when I decided I wanted to go to Ghana, I contacted him and said, “I’m Olly Wilson, I’m teaching at Berkeley, I’d like to go spend a year at Ghana, can you help me?” and he said, “Yes,” because he was the
director, you know, “We’ll officially invite you and make you a visiting scholar and help you get a house and so forth.” I never did talk about that house, so I’ll come back and talk about that house. So he was the conduit by which I was able to get accepted there and we’ve become friends over the years. And while I was there, there was a conference there and I gave a paper and it really got me started on this whole line of inquiry which got me started on African and African American music.

[phone interruption]

Wilson: Anyway, let me tell you about the house and then we probably should stop pretty soon. The university made a bungalow available to us. As most African universities do, they own some community. They have a little housing that they have available to faculty. They had a bungalow that was available that had a nice living room and dining room and so forth. It was like a compound, there was a place for the servants to live in and there’s a place for the car, garage and all that. When you come to a university like that, it’s absolutely necessary that once you get the bungalow you have to hire the people that work there. You hire a house boy who cleans, who keeps the place clean; you hire a cook; you hire a night watchman, you know, and maybe a driver, too, because presumably you’re going to have a car. The expense of doing this is very modest by our terms. And also we thought, ‘Wait a minute, what’s this about house boys and cooks, we don’t have a house boy and cook. And I don’t know how well they cook and what are they going to be cooking’ and so forth, and Elouise was there and she said, “I want to cook, we’re not going to do that.” We resisted hiring anybody initially until somebody pulled me aside and said, “Look, it’s part of the economy. You’ve got to hire the people because people depend upon doing that.” So we hired a house boy; we had a night watchman. I didn’t want a driver; we drove. We had to buy a car. This was in 1971. We bought a ten-year-old Volkswagen bug, a beetle, for a thousand dollars and sold it a year later for a thousand dollars, so it was fine.

We had two employees. The house boy, they told us pay him about 15 cedis. I said, ‘That’s like fifteen dollars, less than 15 dollars-worth. That didn’t seem fair, we can’t pay anybody that. We can pay him forty to fifty dollars.’ “No! You cannot pay him that much, that’s too much! You’re going to upset the economy if you pay him that much, that’s too much!” So I was going, “Wait a minute, that doesn’t seem right.” He had a place that he lived in and he had his own food and so forth, so we ended up paying him about thirty-five thousand dollars a month. We had to sort of do that surreptitiously, but still, I couldn’t pay him any less than that, and it seemed—even though he had his house and I think that we paid for his food, too, and so forth. I think he was a young kid, about seventeen or eighteen who came from the country and who was happy to get this job, to get to the city. It still seemed very modest, but then it was explained to me that, “Look, the guys who work at the university who have some education are probably making forty-five, fifty. You can’t pay that guy forty-five, fifty, because you’re really going to mess up things and then all the
other—.” He probably was the highest paid house boy in that thing and so forth. That was the best that we could do.

Then the first morning he knocked at six o’clock, knocking on the door and we said, “No, no, no, don’t come, we’ll tell you when to come. We’re still asleep. We’ll tell you.” So there was some adjustments made. His name was George, and it was good and worked out well. He was a good soccer player and the kids were, you know, Kent was about that time—this was Africa, so he was just about six or seven. He liked to play so George would teach him how to play soccer. It was great and we had a big yard and a lot of things to play with, so it was a lot of fun.

Wilmot: Were your children in school?

Wilson: Yeah. They went to the University of Ghana school, there was a laboratory school that was associated with the University of Ghana. That was an experience too, because even though they said they didn’t do it, they actually did. They actually would pop kids if they didn’t—they had a little ruler and would spank kids. So Dawn was sitting in class one day and they were asking some question about something, and they were going around and she figured out—she didn’t know the answer, and everybody who didn’t know was getting a slap on the hand or something [makes striking sound]. She’s never been, you know—she came from Berkeley schools, so the idea of somebody popping you, especially because you don’t know the answer—

Wilmot: Uh-uh. It was like [unintelligible].

Wilson: Yeah! So it was like—she jumped out of her desk and left to come home and told us, “They’re going to spank me!” We said, “What?!” and we went over to see the headmaster and he was very apologetic, “Oh, we’re a civilized country. We don’t believe in stuff like that” and blah, blah, blah. He said, “Well this teacher there, he’s from Togo and it’s a French possession. These Francophone Africans, you never know what they’re going to do.[laughs] He knows better than to do it but he does it.” Anyway, he said, “That won’t happen.” So when Dawn went back to school the next day we said, “Look, okay, they say they’re not going to do it.” So he said, “Who is Dawn Wilson?” so she raised her hand and he said, “Okay.” So he still was spanking other people but he never spanked her. [chuckles] Kent, he did get spanked. He was a little kid in first grade or something. I think the teacher did spank him one time or something and he just didn’t tell us about it until later on and then we went over there and nothing happened after that.

But it was also very—it was a British school, they ran it like a British school. They had sixth form, that whole business, in sixth form you have this big test. And everything was ranked, your status in the class was ranked. And Dawn being the competitive person that she was—the number one ranked kid—and I think she must have been in the third grade—was a guy who was Ghanaian
whose family had been in the diplomatic corps so he had studied and lived and grown up in Europe most of the time, between Africa and Europe. He was really smart and he was number one. Number two was always a battle between Dawn and a girl whose name was Lina, her good friend who was from India, so Lina and Dawn were always battling for this number two spot. The number one spot, this guy was off the charts, you know. It turns out, she happened to be a very competitive person so she’s the kind of person who’s going to fight for everything. But it was interesting to see this kind of things and how things were decided essentially by about the fourth or fifth grade. If you don’t well on a certain exam, you’re not going to go on in your life; you’re not going on the fast track. You’re going to be going to a technical school, you aren’t going to be going to an intellectual—which means that your choices are really limited. But it was very exciting. There were a lot of marvelous things: the food, the dances, the music, and getting to know people and really developing some lifelong friendships.

Wilmot: When you think of what you brought—this is the last question, I know you’re ready—from that, briefly what did you gain? It may be professionally or—?

Wilson: There are a number of different things here. On one hand it gave me an insight into African music, specifically the music of Ghana, and specifically the music of the Ewe people, and also the music of the [Gombo?] people. And gave me an understanding of that that would have been impossible to develop not having that experience. It also gave me a much clearer idea of the role of music within society. And it helped explain a lot of things about the African Diaspora in that music in most traditional African societies is obligatory and essential. Essential in terms of the whole cosmology of peoples of African descent, certainly in traditional Africa and also in the African Diaspora. The whole notion that the universe consists of a series of forces that are constantly interacting with one another and that causality is related to the dynamic interaction of these forces. In every society, there is some word for the basic essence, the basic force. Whether we’re talking about [Magarra?] or whether we’re talking about some of the different words that it’s called, [eshe?], it’s called among the Yorubans, which you hear, there is this idea that this basic force is really the thing that causes things to happen. The degree to which you have that force is important. Given that view of the cosmology and given the view of the universe as being a hierarchical one: a central begatter, onyane [spells], the Ghanaian term for that, is the basic creative force. It has multiple names, by different cultures, but this is the creative force, this is the creative person and this is the source of all this force and everything. But at the top of society there exists onyane or one of the other expressions of the same thing. Then in the middle range, there exists middle level deities that are constantly interacting with one another. Then, the third level is mankind or humankind. At the top level, you have this basic force but he creates things, he/she, and sometimes its {Mau Lisa?} who happens to be female. There’s the basic force that creates everything and then is sort of disinterested and then is just there. Then you have all the interaction going on with all these middle-level deities
that represent various forces of nature and also are seen as sometimes the spirits, the ancestor spirits, of very famous people who once lived. So in order to cause something to happen, you implore these deities to do something on your behalf. And so speaking to the deities or calling forth the deities becomes fundamental, and they way that one does that is through music. So, music becomes obligatory in times of dealing with the living and the past living. So music is absolutely essential in that view of the world. You have that basic concept throughout the African Diaspora. Whether you’re talking about candomblé in Brazil, or santéria in Cuba, or we’re talking about voodoo in Haiti, or the many other names it’s called. So throughout Africa, you find this kind of view of the world and its expressed in different ways with this idea of the basic force as being the way that things are caused and the way that its communicated is usually through music, so music is essential, and musicians become essential, and important people.

Wilmot: You have a piece which I think you did much later called “Shango?”

Wilson: Yeah, “Shango Memory,” right. I call it Shango Memory. Shango is one of the deities of the Yoruba. I use the Yoruba deities because the Yoruba concepts, the Yoruba titles simply became the most dominant in much of the new world, for example, in Brazil in Bahia. Most of the deities take on Yoruba names. Although a lot of the deities are also related to the deities from the Congo, so you have these Congolese—. But the Yoruba names stuck. The Yoruba names are also the dominant ones in Cuba, when people talk about santéria, often the deities that are referred to, if you ask them about the names, are Yoruba names, or names that are mixtures of either Dahomian and/or Yoruba names. In Haiti, again frequently the Yoruba names are there, although sometimes the Dahomian names are also there.

Wilmot: What was this piece about for you?

Wilson: This piece, “Shango Memory?” “Shango Memory” was both a celebration of Shango, the deity of thunder, the god of lightning, and so forth, but there’s also another aspect of Shango that has to do with moral rectitude—if you do something wrong, watch out, Shango might get to you. It’s that kind of thing. Also I called the piece “Shango Memory” not only because of the memory of Shango, the concept of Shango, but the concept of the memory, the cultural memory of African ideas reflected in music. So I used that as a general outline to, in the course of this piece, sort of write a piece which was a straightforward piece but influenced by my reinterpretations of ideas that inform African American music. By so doing, in the course of the pieces, there’s certain kinds of movements, certain kinds of gestures, that clearly reflect aspects of African American music, but it’s a reinterpretation of this cultural memory that ties African American culture to African culture. So that’s sort of the idea, an attempt to deal with that in this piece. The piece is a composed piece in an abstract way but with a conscious evocation of ideals of
music that you find in African music. So that’s sort of what I was attempting
to do with that piece.

Wilmot: That’s it for today.

Wilson: Good, that’s good.

[End Interview 5]
Interview 6: February 13, 2003

February 13, 2003, interview number six with Olly Wilson for the Oral History Office. Let’s get started then. I want to focus on your work today and I want to start by asking you about the commissions, because you must be the most commissioned young composer of the 21st century.

[laughs] I doubt that, but I have been fortunate.

You have, huge commissions, and I want to know which are the most important to you.

I think, for different reasons—well, the first important commission was one from the Boston symphony for a piece that was done at Tanglewood. Traditionally, under the old regime at Tanglewood, they would commission several young composers, two or three a year, to do a piece for the Tanglewood orchestra. In 1970, I received one of those commissions, and that was very important because it gave me a performance on the national scale. Tanglewood is a mecca for people interested in all kinds of music, but particularly new music at the end of August, the end of July, the latter part of the festival, usually late August. So I had this commission for them and that was particularly important. Gunther Schuller conducted the piece and it was very successful, so I was very pleased with that. It gave me an opportunity to meet with a lot of other composers of my generation, older and younger. This took place in the summer of 1970. So that was important, getting exposed to a national audience, but also exposing me to what other composers were doing. I had seen that, but being around a place for a week and a half, was very important. The title of that piece was “Voices.” That was the first important commission.

Another important commission, I think, was another Boston symphony commission that came fourteen years later. This was with the Boston Symphony.

That was Sinfonia.

That was Sinfonia. That may have had—no, I know it had something to do with the fact that the Tanglewood piece, because it was done in Tanglewood, [Seiji Ozawa?] was still at San Francisco Symphony. I think he had been there or was visiting or something, but at any rate he decided to perform that piece in San Francisco. It may have been that Schuller had mentioned it to him or whatever but he performed the piece in San Francisco so I got to know him. Subsequently, fourteen years later, he invited me to write a piece for the Boston Symphony. And that was Sinfonia and that was good. He also did “Voices,” not only with San Francisco, but he did it with Boston, earlier. And then, later on he invited me to do a piece for San Francisco.
Crawford: Is that the way it often works? That you will be linked with someone like Ozawa, a conductor who likes your work, someone like Ozawa who wants to commission it? And that was a commission for the centennial for the Boston symphony, wasn’t it? And there were nine other compositions.

Wilson: That’s right. Nine or ten, something like that. Composers from all over the place. I was very fortunate to have the commission, because the big surprise that came after that was that when I got there they decided to record the piece. Not only did they perform it, they said they were going to record it. It was just an amazing experience to go there and expect them to have the piece. You’re a little concerned about the piece, because you know that professional orchestras don’t have much time; I tried a lot of problematic things in that piece; it was a very difficult piece. It was a very challenging piece and they played it with aplomb. I was very pleased with it. And so not only did we get an excellent recording, but we got a recording, which meant the definitive recording.

Crawford: Who recorded that?

Wilson: Boston Symphony and Seiji Ozawa.

Crawford: And which company recorded it?

Wilson: This was on, I think, was on New World Records.

Crawford: That’s the piece with “Elegy?”

Wilson: Right, as the second movement. “Elegy”, which is in memoriam for my father and Calvin Simmons.

Crawford: Do you want to talk about Calvin a little bit? What was his special thing?

Wilson: Calvin, as you know, was a young conductor from here. I didn’t really know Calvin, but he was apparently born in Oakland or he grew up in Oakland. He was a fantastic pianist and I think—I don’t know where he went, but I think he went several places, maybe USC or someplace like that, and then I think, he went to Curtis and then got involved in opera and was also interested in conducting. For many years he had been an accompanist with the San Francisco Opera, so he knew a lot of musicians and singers. He was also interested in conducting. I think he went to Tanglewood and studied with several well-known conductors along the way. But he eventually became a conductor in conducting a youth orchestra down in L.A. Or it may not have been a youth orchestra, I think it was somewhere between a youth orchestra and another orchestra. Ultimately, after Harold {Faberman?} left and there were a couple of other people who came after {Faberman?}, I believe, Calvin was asked to be the conductor.
Crawford: "Very young."

Wilson: "He was very young, I think he was in his thirties. He was from here and there was a lot of excitement because first of all, he was a young conductor; second place he was a young black conductor, and who was from Oakland. So it was built in. There was a lot of interest as there always is with a new conductor. But Calvin had this special flavor because he had this great sense of humor and he was an excellent pianist as well. As a matter of fact, at his first concert, he sat and conducted I think it was Hayden or something from the piano, which was often done in that day. He had that flare as a musician. And he often had singers because he knew many singers from his San Francisco Opera experience."

Crawford: "I used to go to rehearsals. I worked there with Calvin, was on the staff. He was the only person who could tell {Curt Herbert Adler?} that the Wagner was not to be done that way; it was to be done another way. And Adler listened to him."

Wilson: "Yeah, okay."

Crawford: "I think he was twenty-nine!"

Wilson: "Yeah, he was very young and had really done his homework overtime."

Crawford: "Was there a special genius?"

Wilson: "Yeah. I think all of those things worked in his favor. He was an excellent musician and also a very warm, outgoing human being. I remember seeing him the first time in a recital being performed by Calvin Simmons and Jessye Norman. And they came out. And Jessye waddled out on the stage because Jessye’s huge. And she’s big and huge and very regal. And Calvin’s very skinny and tall and looks scarecrow-like. He had these enormous eyes, as you well know, and he was walking out and they waddles out on the stage. They were just a funny couple to see them come out there. Then they began to make music and it was the most superb concert I have ever heard at Hertz Hall, because he was a superb accompanist, she was a superb vocalist, and it was just one of those experiences that transcended what normally happens. It was just really exquisite."

Crawford: "And your music, was it simply a memorial tribute to Calvin, or was it—?"

Wilson: "Well, the piece was a memorial tribute to Calvin. What happened is that when Calvin became conductor, he called me and said, “I’d like you to write us a piece.” I said, “Of course, I’d be pleased to do it. I wish you well.” I had met him, I think—I don’t know if I was on the search committee for that or just—I may have been because Oakland Symphony had a done a piece of mine, a premiere of mine. And this is a another important commission—"
Crawford: Is this *Lumina*?

Wilson: No, this is “Spirit Song” and this is with [Harold Falderman?] and this is 1974, 1976, 1974? Sometime in the seventies. Oakland Symphony had just purchased the Paramount Theater, they had formed it and they were making it a concert hall.

Crawford: Oh right, we talked about that piece.

Wilson: So I was asked to do that. They commissioned a couple of composers to commemorate the opening and I was one of them. I wrote a piece to use the space in that place. I felt an affinity with the Oakland Symphony. Then, subsequently, a year after, when my daughter was in the Oakland Youth Symphony, they commissioned me to do a piece for the Oakland Youth Symphony. So I did a piece called “Reflections” for the Oakland Youth Symphony, because my daughter was playing violin in the Symphony. I mean they asked me to do it, and—

Crawford: So you had history.

Wilson: So I had a history with them. Then Calvin asked me to do a piece for the Oakland Symphony. So I did a piece, the piece was called “Trillity.” He conducted it at the Oakland Symphony. I developed a relationship with him for that. They did a really strong performance, and then Calvin subsequently did that piece in Detroit. He took it on the road with him, I think he performed at least a couple of times outside of Oakland, one time when he was guest-conducting in Detroit, probably. This was, again, a long piece, probably twenty minutes. That’s big for an orchestra piece, for new music. It was—I was impressed by the fact that he did that and I felt that he was a friend of mine and also he was an extraordinary musician. We worked together. When he died suddenly, I guess we were all—

Crawford: Huge loss.

Wilson: —devastated. And it was the same year that my father had died, so loss was part of my thinking at that time. It’s difficult to express your feelings, but one of the advantages of being a composer is being able to express your deepest feelings through music. So I did that second movement.

It was also interesting because that was the first piece in which I had written an overt melodic line, for a long time. So the second movement, the elegy, features that very long line, when it seemed perfectly appropriate for this kind of thing, which was essentially a requiem-like. The second movement, it starts with that long pedal point. That pedal point is on E. And if you think about the history of requiems, they almost all begin on either D or E or C, [chuckles] but more often E and sometimes a D, because it’s one of the lowest notes of the [doublex ?]. The lowest note of the [double x?] is a E. Some [doublex?]
using the extension can go down to C but—that’s one of the reasons people often think of this long sustained kind of thing for pedal point, you think of the Mozart’s requiem, that long D.

Crawford: The Verdi?

Wilson: Well, the Verdi and the *Requiem*. The Mozart requiem has a long D. So it’s just part of that kind of expression that you’re trying to capture. When you do that, whether you’re conscious or not, you are reflecting on all the other requiems that you have ever heard. I don’t think I consciously said, “Oh, I’m going to do it here,” because I just did it that way because it sounded right.

Crawford: It seemed appropriate.

Wilson: It seemed appropriate, but when you reflect on why it seems appropriate, then its, “Ah, that’s because you’ve had all the experience playing the double bass, and playing in orchestras, and playing requiems,” and doing that kind of stuff so it seemed natural.

At any rate, that was a movement that was very deeply felt. Any time you’re writing a movement about your parent, your father, who I loved dearly, and about a close friend like Calvin Simmons, who had this tragic end, it was really a special kind of experience. You dig deep into the inner recesses of whatever it is from whence comes inspiration.

Crawford: Does that work remain close to you, especially close to you?

Wilson: Yes it does, yes it does. As a matter of fact it does. When people ask me, “Look, I’ve never heard your music,” because contemporary music is not [always music?] you hear. People say, “Can you give me an example of any of your recordings?” and I say, “Yes, there are several recordings.” If it’s a general person who’s not, let’s say, that sophisticated in terms of contemporary music, but really is a sensitive, intelligent, person who has decent ears and wants to listen to something, the piece that I usually refer them to is that piece, is *Sinfonia*. Because it’s a long piece, its twenty four minutes, and it’s got a range of emotion there. It also is a superb performance and it’s deeply felt so that it gives a people a sense of that. I often tell people when they listen to that, “Look, if you don’t know much about contemporary music, so that you don’t listen to the first movement and turn it off, listen to the second movement first.” [chuckles] It’s sort of to ease them into it. Because the second movement is pretty straightforward about what it’s about. So that’s one of the reasons I do that.

Crawford: That was ‘84, I think.

Wilson: That was ’84.
Crawford: So let’s move on through some of the other big ones.

Wilson: There was another piece—there were several—but one of them was “Sometimes.” I don’t think “Sometimes” was commissioned by anybody; it was just a piece that I wanted to do. I was reflecting about growing up as a child within the Black Baptist Church and having been the son of a singer, and—as I said, spirituals were extremely important to me—and I wanted to write a piece that reflected that. Subsequent to writing that piece, which I think was done around 1976, I wanted to write a piece that really captured that. Now, there was a catalyst for that. The catalyst for that is that I’m also involved in studies of African American music, so I’ve have attended a number of different conferences having to do with that, and written papers and published articles about the history of African American music. I’ve talked quite a bit about that earlier.

Crawford: Yes, this last discussion was largely about that.

Wilson: But I went to a conference in Baltimore, and I had one of those unusual experiences at a conference— because it was a conference about African American music and in that scholarly kind of situation there are debates and discussion and assertions and counter-assertions that go on in these kinds of conferences all the time—but also there was a conference part of this, and a young man came out and he sang spirituals. Instead of singing spirituals as they traditionally are done on the stage, that is piano and voice that goes all the way back to Paul Robeson, and back even earlier to the so-called creation of the so-called concert spiritual, instead of doing it that way, where you come out and the pianist comes out and you sing—and some of the arrangements of spirituals are marvelous. This origin goes back to Harry T. {Bearly?} around the turn of the century, who was a student of Dvořák’s. I think we talked a little bit about that.

Crawford: We did.

Wilson: So, instead of singing it that way, this guy came out and performed several spirituals, but he sang them all a cappella. There was this marvelous combination of an understanding of what is generally referred to as the folk spiritual which is, you know, “We don’t really know who did it; it’s part of folk music; it’s part of tradition.” Spirituals are usually a group activity, and one of the things that distinguishes the concert spiritual from the other spiritual is that you have multiple people singing. It’s choral; it’s group singing; people are singing this together. One of the things that makes it sort of interesting is this sort of group of voices singing it. But not always in unison, sort of in unison, but somebody’s a little bit faster, the tambours are sort of distinct from each other, the sort of combination of voices that has a sort of drone-like quality which is just, just exciting and very, very different. Then, once start arranging them and you go back to the Fisk Jubilee Singers—you use a four-part harmony, you use a Western harmony as opposed to the
nodal structure of much of the original songs. You also have them arranged in a structure, sometime strophic form, and some of the spirituals really were and some weren’t. So you get this. But they still retained the quality of the best-arranged spirituals, still retain the essence of it. Some of the best concert spirituals, the piano and vocals arrangements of Bearly and others, really in hall jazz and many others still retained that quality. So I disagree with people who say the minute they were arranged, they aren’t good anymore, I disagree with that. I think the essence of them can be arranged; they simply change to reflect the reality of the people who do it.

So this one, this singer comes out and sings his spiritual solo, now, but he sings it in a combination of the old deep sort of singing and yet there’s sort of arranged singing. He was a trained vocalist who was steeped in Western singing: art song, leider, opera, and so forth. So you’ve got this interesting combination. [laughs] But he also was steeped in the old fashioned, down-home country way, the deep, folk tradition. So he pulled it together and I thought, boy, this was extraordinary. What happened in the course of the singing? He sang a couple of spirituals, well known. In the course of it, the mood was just perfectly quiet. These were all of these academics and scholars and people of people. Everybody was there and they hear this, and even though there’s thousands, it’s quiet, it’s really quiet. I look around the room and there’s a tear rolling off the face of the people. I look up at the singer and there’s a tear rolling down. Then I felt my face and there’s tears rolling down, and I said, “There’s something powerful here, there’s something really very powerful here.” I said, “I’ve got to write some music for this guy, and it’s got to be a spiritual.”

Crawford: Who was this?

Wilson: This was William Brown, William Brown. That’s why I left his name off. [laughter] So therefore I told him, “Man, I can’t believe this, you know, we’re all jaded. We’ve heard so much music, but we don’t cry. But you did, you pulled something out really deep. I looked around and everybody’s bawling and you, and then I look, and I am, too. I’m saying this is very special, and I need to write a piece for you, I want to write a piece for you, and I want it to be a spiritual.” He used to perform fairly frequently, because he used to perform in what used to be called “Today’s Artists.” He performed with that a lot.

Crawford: Oh, yes. I remember that.

Wilson: And then he also sang a lot of contemporary music, you know. It’s unusual to find a black—well, he’s the only one I knew—a black tenor who also was a specialist in singing contemporary music. He did several of the Stravinsky, Dylan Thomas “Do Not Go Gently—” no, it wasn’t that, it was an early Stravinsky piece.

Wilson: What was the piece? I’m just blanking right now, I can’t think of it.

Crawford: “Do Not Go Gently Into that Deep Night?”

Wilson: I don’t know if it was that Dylan Thomas but it was some Stravinsky setting for some Dylan Thomas.

Crawford: We’ll find out.

Wilson: So anyway, I was conducting the Berkeley Contemporary Music Players at that time, so I hired him to come out and sing. Then when he performed that, I said, “Okay, I’d like you to go in the studio,” because we had the electronic studio downstairs in the lower level of Morrison Hall. I said, “I’d like you to come down and I’d like you to record a few things a cappella.” And I really decided what I wanted the piece to be is “Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child,” and “I’d like you to just sing, and I’ll use that and I’ll modify it and do a lot of things to it, but it will become the source for a new piece.” He did that and I did that, and that’s where “Sometimes” comes from. It was really because he was a specialist and because he had such a willingness to try some really difficult things that many singers wouldn’t try. I really just let my imagination flow freely.

Crawford: Is that recorded?

Wilson: Yeah, that’s recorded. That’s recorded twice, you know. It’s really a spectacular performance because he’s singing up in the stratosphere and I ask him to do a lot of things with his voice. I mean, he and the tape are sort of working together. I really was interested in—.

Crawford: I’ve heard that because the Contemporary Music Players did that.

Wilson: Right. That was really a pivotal piece because it really got me refocused into—I found a way to deal with the tradition, the African American music tradition, in what I considered a fresh way and one that reflected me, reflected me in terms of bringing in the abstraction. Because I realized as I looked at African American art and music that abstraction was an important part of the African experience, and part of the African American experience in a different way. Although African American experience is also very prosaic in certain ways. I mean, the idea of taking something that’s very simple and making it special. The term I often use—and I hope I’m not repeating myself a lot—but often if you think about spirituals and if you think about the Christmas season—actually there aren’t that many spirituals based in the Christmas season—there’s sociological reasons for that. And one of them is, and a very famous one is, “Mary Had a Baby.” But if you think about that, “Mary Had a Baby,” which is so plain, and you think about the Immaculate Conception,
which is so grand, you say, wait a minute, how did this marvelous philosophical idea of the immaculate conception get translated into “Mary Had a Baby?” Well, it sort of reflects different values. It something very basic: “Mary had a baby, yes, Lord. Mary had a baby, yes, my Lord.” It’s something very simple, but yet something special in a very common way that everybody can understand. It was looking at that and what is it about that, that makes it a powerful expression?

Crawford: Bringing it forward.

Wilson: Bringing it forward.

Crawford: Well that is your watchword, isn’t it? That’s what you always wanted to do.

Wilson: I’ve wanted to reinterpret that.

Crawford: It’s interesting to me that the same works come up again, so let’s go there and figure out what are the other works. For instance, I was looking at your retrospective exhibit. Did you choose those scores? In the music department exhibit, which is so fine?

Wilson: I think they just asked me. I probably did choose them. But I chose them on the basis of what looks good visually, what’s—

Crawford: Let’s go back to that then. After “Sometimes”—we don’t need to talk necessarily about important commissions—but where are the ones that you hope will live, that live mostly for you?

Wilson: I think, I think—that’s a tough question. You hope they all live. As the cliché says, once you write music, or art, or a book, or whatever, they’re like your children. I mean, it’s like you have invested time and effort in them and you really believe in them. But there are some that you resonate with most over a period of time. If you are fortunate to live, over twenty or thirty years, you can go back and listen to something. A retrospective, you listen to something that was done thirty years ago, you say, “That was really nice, you know, it still works.” Some of the pieces, you think they’re good sounding pieces, they’re important pieces, but there are certain ones that really jump out at you. I mentioned Sinfonia, I mentioned “Sometimes.” We haven’t mentioned—let’s see.

Crawford: “No More” I don’t think you talked about, which is a piece I like.

Wilson: “No More.” That’s the piece that you heard Bill Brown singing. Because I wrote first “Sometimes” and then I wrote “No More” for him. That was a piece that reflected my concern about social issues, specifically the situation in South Africa and what that meant.
Crawford: You set texts, South African texts.

Wilson: I was very pleased with that piece. It was a chamber piece and Bill did a marvelous job as usual, and his interpretation is always just a marvelous kind of thing. That’s really important. Then there are other orchestra pieces. The recent Chicago piece about—well, I it’s not recent anymore, I guess it was done 1997, 1998, 1999? Hold On. Hold On is the longest piece I’ve ever written; it’s forty minutes. It was like, Chicago Symphony says they want you to do a piece, and I said, “Okay, are you talking about another ten minute—?” They said, “Whatever you want to do.” I said, “Okay, fine,” so I kept going.

Crawford: How did that generate? Who was the point man?

Wilson: I don’t know exactly, I really don’t know. It may have had—by that time, I had had New York Philharmonic, I had had other major symphonies do—Boston, New York, Cleveland, and other places—do my work. Every orchestra has, frequently, a composer in residence, or if not a composer in residency, they have someone who scouts around and helps them find pieces. Or sometimes the conductor does it. In that particular case, I don’t really know. I know that {Sam Floyd?}, recently retired, he was the director of Black Music Research Center, lives in Chicago, and I know he had been trying to get the Chicago Symphony to be—

Crawford: That’s in Columbia College?

Wilson: That’s in Columbia College. I know he had been trying to get the orchestra to do more music of African composers and so forth, for a number of years, and they responded somewhat. But, often, sometimes the response is, “Okay, we’ll do something,” sort of noblesse oblige, but it’s sort of the kind of thing that you can do in one rehearsal so you’ve got that interest out of the way and you can go on to something else, do what you usually do. But my music doesn’t fit in that category, because it’s not the kind of music you can do in one rehearsal, not and do well. And no orchestra wants to do “badly,” quote. So, in order to do some work of mine, they had to—. But it’s hard to know which of those features and why they did it and how they did it. It was not your typical kind of overture piece. And that does not necessarily have anything to do with being black or any other color, it has to do with the fact that most orchestras have formulae that they use to do music. And the music is, “We’re going to do a concerto because that attracts people and there’s a star.”

Crawford: Soloist, yeah.

Wilson: A soloist, and people have heard about the soloist, and they want to see the soloist. So you have that soloist in your concert, then people are going to come. Anybody who’s hot, they come and they go, pianists, violists, whatever, [loud clanking] but that ensures that you will have an audience of so many people. Then you’ve got to have—often you’ll have something that’s
part of the normal repertoire: Hayden, Mozart, Beethoven, and more frequently, a nineteenth century composer to end the first half, or maybe to have the concerto at end of the first half and the second half will be an extended piece from the nineteenth century: Brahms, Mahler, whoever.

Crawford: How many pieces are in that programming? I’ve often wondered because you hear them—

Wilson: —Over and over again. There are about the same fifty pieces.

Crawford: Guaranteed.

Wilson: Guaranteed. And then the champions. Then people become like—{M.T.T.?} is the champion of Mahler, and so you hear Mahler. And then you get other composers—the champion of Beethoven, and then you get the new Beethoven, the new Brahms, the new whatever. But it’s the same thing that all the orchestra members learned to play when they were in high school. And they’ve played it under this conductor and under that conductor, “Oh, lets listen to this conductor’s Beethoven’s Fifth. Or this conductor’s.” So it becomes very rarefied. So you have that. Then often to get things started there’s often an overture. So the meat of the deal is going to be the concerto and the major symphony. And then the other pieces will be an overture. Now, so when people start advocating for contemporary music—and this is only recently because I’m old enough to remember the days when it was exceedingly rare to hear anything that was written during the 20th century done—so that once that happened, often people would say, “We’ll start off the concert with,” instead of your typical {von Webber?} overture or your Mozart overture or Hayden symphony which is your first piece, “we’ll start out with a contemporary piece.” The idea of the contemporary piece can be almost anything, but it’s about ten minutes long. It’s one movement, ten minutes long, and that’s it. We’ve done the contemporary piece. People like it, don’t like it, but that’s done and now we go onto others. So that’s the way it’s done. Okay. But, the problem is that if you want to write a piece longer than ten minutes—and ten minutes is generous, usually it’s about eight minutes, five to eight minutes, because you know some overtures are five to eight minutes. So if you want to fill that spot with something longer, you’ll have a hard time, because people don’t like to do multi-movement contemporary works. Unless the conductor is really devoted to it, loves that work and wants to do it and does it anyway, or is beyond the—

Crawford: So they tell you, “about twelve minutes,” no?

Wilson: In the commission it says, “You will write a piece no longer than blah blah blah,” or, “between blah blah blah and blah blah blah.”

Crawford: It sounds like radio programming between commercial sponsors. [chuckles]
Wilson: That's right! “You will be between this and this.” So that’s it. So you work within that framework.

Crawford: Is that okay for you or do you consider it {disrespectful}??

Wilson: It depends. If somebody comes up and says, “Look, we want you to write a piece, it’s a short piece and we want it to be ten minutes,” fine. If I agree to do that, then I say okay. But often I’ll say, “Okay, look, but I’d rather do a piece that’s more extended,” and then we can negotiate about that. And it sort of depends on where you are in your career. If you’re a young composer and you’re starting out and a major orchestra comes to you and says, “We want to commission you to do a piece, but we don’t want it to be more than eight minutes,” you say, “Alright!”[laughter] But if you’ve been doing it for a long time, and they want to do a piece that’s five [minutes], you say, “Look, I’ve got a lot of pieces like that, you know.” I’ve written pieces when I was younger and sometimes not so younger, which just because of who it was and what it was, you’re asked to do a piece of so long. I’ve done a piece of that length and once you do that—you know. But if someone comes to you and says, “Look, we’d like to have a work of yours, we’d really think what you’ve got to say is something interesting and we’d like to hear,” then I say, “Okay, ten to twenty minutes.”

Crawford: Twenty’s on the long side.

Wilson: Twenty is on the long side and it’s a multi-movement work, usually. And fifteen is somewhere in between, depending if that’s all you’ve got to say in fifteen minutes. Fifteen minutes in musical time is a long time. So, anyway, all of that goes in—

Crawford: —figures in.

Wilson: Right. But what happened with Chicago—and this is what’s so admirable—is that they came to me and said, “We’d like you to write a piece for us. It can be up to thirty minutes.” So I said, “Oh! Okay, fine!” So that was really unusual, because usually it’s from twenty to twenty five, generally because they have to know about programming. Because people get restive in a concert. So anyway, I wrote the piece—.

Crawford: So this was a symphony?

Wilson: This was a symphony. I called it *Symphony No. 3, Hold On*. Multi-movement symphony, three movements. But what happened was that I started writing and writing, and it wasn’t thirty minutes, it was closer to forty. So then we had to talk and—. Anyway, they did it, they did it. And I looked at it and found a couple of places that I could cut out. Because it was over forty, it was like forty one, forty three. I said, “Well, I don’t have to have this.” But it was a long statement.
Crawford: Is that a favorite work of yours?

Wilson: That’s a favorite of mine. Now, it’s only been performed once. I mean, when you write a forty-minute work, somebody’s going to have to really believe in you to program a 40 minute work.

Crawford: But that was only ’98 or something, 1998.

Wilson: That’s right. And it could be performed again, but it’s not been performed again. And you know, I hope, in my lifetime I hear another performance. But they did a marvelous performance. Well, it wasn’t perfect, but it was good. It was a good performance.

Crawford: And it was well-received.

Wilson: It was well-received. So, I was pleased with that. That’s another piece that’s important for another reason. Then on the chamber side, several pieces: “The Echoes” for clarinet and tape was probably my most frequently performed piece. That’s—

Crawford: Why? Why is that do you think?

Wilson: I think because it’s for a solo instrument and it’s for electronic sound. And it’s a challenge. It was written for Phil Rehfeldt, who was a specialist in contemporary music, he taught at the University of Redlands down in L.A. And he was one of the specialists in clarinet music and it was part of a commission which was supposed to be for a clarinetist and a {friend}. Phil Rehfeldt was a good friend of {Borny?} Childs, who I guess was a composer, sort of a writer-composer. And they set about to sort of do things. And since Borny doesn’t really play piano that well, if it could be a tape piece, then Borny pushes the tape recorder stuff, and that kind of stuff. I wrote it for tape because I wanted to do a tape—I’d done a series of pieces for tape and single instruments, so I wrote this piece. Phil performed it a lot, all over the place, and then he passed it on to other clarinetists. And other clarinetists were doing it. I don’t think there’s been a year since 1974 when that piece hasn’t been done once. Then students of people, “Oh, I studied this piece,” so they’re playing it. Often when people are saying, “We want you to come and we want you to be guest lecturer, and do a piece, “What would you recommend?” And they say, “But we’ve only got a trio or we only have this,” especially at smaller institutions. I say, “Well, there’s a piece for clarinet and tape.” Often if there’s a good clarinetist, they’ve heard about the tape because Phil, I think he wrote a book on clarinet techniques and I think that he used some of the techniques I’d used in the piece and talked about that. So some clarinetists have been heard about it.

Crawford: How is his last name, Phil?

Crawford: That’s just very gratifying.

Wilson: Yeah, the piece is out there.

Crawford: To have a piece that’s the most often performed.

Wilson: Right, if it’s not the most, it’s one of the most frequently performed. Because it’s a solo instrument and people—once they investigate in doing it, because in order to do it right you literally have to memorize the tape. I’ve got the score, and the score shows all of that. As a matter of fact, the score is up there in that retrospective, too.

Crawford: Yes, yes.

Wilson: Because I had to make up all these symbols for the sound of the tape. The clarinetists look at that, but then actually, after a while, they memorize the sound. Once you memorize that, and you’ve worked this out—

Crawford: You have an accompaniment, more or less.

Wilson: It’s like an accompaniment. And then you want to do it more than once. It’s easy because you just put a tape in. Now it’s on CD, the publisher has it on CD, plug it up. And then I call for the clarinetist to play into a microphone. I want the clarinetist playing into a microphone so that the sound is also integrated with the electronic sound. I think one of the biggest mistakes that I think some people do is when you write a piece for electronic sound and live voices, if you haven’t thought about what this does acoustically, that is, if you only hear the sound of acoustical instruments, and you hear that in combination with electronic sound, there’s a real dichotomy between the experience of hearing something that comes from speakers and something that comes naturally. Because the acoustical properties are very different. On the other hand, if you take the live sound and you perform it through so that it’s also coming through the speakers, then it has some of the same qualities that the electronic sound does, and yet it retains some of the vitality that you have in the live moment. That was something that I discovered way back in the early seventies.

Crawford: Yes, we talked about that, you were looking for that.

Wilson: So, I think that’s another reason why my piece is done. I just came back from Cleveland State earlier in the fall. I was there, they did a concert of my music, and that was one of the pieces they did. This was a young, very young, excellent clarinetist—I can’t remember his name—and he did a superb performance of that piece.
Crawford: Oh, that must please you so much.

Wilson: It was just so great. And he really had worked on it, and really understood the piece, and really was into the piece. So that’s really the piece.

Crawford: So in terms of performance history that’s one you look at and say, “Ah ha. They liked that.”

Wilson: That’s right. Now another piece that has been done and probably almost as much as “Echoes,” although “Echoes” has been around at least twenty to thirty years longer. There’s a piece called a “City Called Heaven,” which is for a chamber ensemble which was done, I’ve forgotten, in 1988, 1989?

Crawford: ‘89 I think.

Wilson: 1989. That was commissioned by the Boston {Musical Viva?}. They did an excellent version of that. And that piece has been done many, many times.

Crawford: That’s for octet?

Wilson: That’s for an octet, yes. I’m really pleased with that. That also reflected—even the title comes from a spiritual. Hold On comes from a spiritual; “City Called Heaven” comes from a spiritual. Maybe the older I get, the more I reflect back to my youth. That piece has been done many, many times. Matter of fact, that was a center piece done in Cleveland. That was recorded by {Boston Musical Viva} and it’s a twenty minute piece, and then it’s been done a number of different places, in different countries, and a number of things. Now, there’s a new recording of that that’s just coming out; it was done in Atlanta by the {Fameris?} Contemporary Music Group. Actually, it was three years ago. I was there. We did a recording and then we listened to all the takes of it and I sent back something that was supposed to be the thing and they sent it back. We did the mixing and so forth. So I was very pleased. But then, I don’t know if they ran out of money or something, it just didn’t come out yet. I’ve got a couple of pieces like that. Like “No More,” for example, was recorded by San Francisco Contemporary Music Players, which I’ve done but it hasn’t been released yet, because {New World} Records was supposed to release it but they screwed up around asking for the money from somebody. Then I was going to get somebody else but then I thought—

Crawford: Isn’t it too bad that the issue always has to be money.

Wilson: Oh, yeah. So anyway, now I was going to put out a recording of all Olly Wilson music. I was going to put on Lumina, the orchestra piece, “No More,” and Visions and Truth, which also hadn’t been on a commercial recording and would have been an interesting combination. But, two big money things, because Visions and Truth required me to pull together the Black Repertory Ensemble—that was another important commission and they did that all over
the place, too. *Visions and Truth*, that’s the group for the Black Repertory Ensemble, which also had three singers with it. Bill Brown was one of them and there were a couple of other people: Donny Lee Albert, who’s a baritone, superb.

Crawford: Oh, yes, he’s wonderful. Been in the chorus a long time.

Wilson: Oh, yes. And Hilda Harris, who’s fantastic at Mozart. Anyway, we got an excellent tape from the live performance, but the quality of the sound from the live performance is a little bit different than what you do if you do it in studio conditions. The other pieces are studio. So anyway, we were going to go into the studio and do that, but it costs about twenty grand just to do that. And I had some money from my chair; I was willing to come up with maybe five, six, eight, maybe ten [thousand] from my chair that I had.

Crawford: What do you mean from your chair? Your in-residence?

Wilson: No. At Berkeley we have a named chair and I had the chair for three years.

Crawford: Whose name, what name by the chair?

Wilson: The name of the chair is—I’m embarrassed, I can’t think of the chair right now.

Crawford: It’s not Block.

Wilson: No, it’s not the Block. Block is different. This is the—I’ll think of it in a minute. Anyway, that chair rotates. The first holder of it in the department was Joe [Kearny?] and then Andrew Imbrie, and then it would alternate between scholar and composer. So Joe was first, Andrew Imbrie was second, {Dan Hotz?} was third, and I was the fourth holder of it. I also happened to be chair of the music department at that time which meant that I didn’t have the time to really plan and use the money, but I had been able to hold onto the money once it was awarded to you for those three years. Fortunately the stock market was up very well, and it was accruing about $25,000 a year.

Crawford: That’s pretty heady, isn’t it?

Wilson: That’s pretty good. So, I was able to travel; I was able to also use it to do things to help the university; I helped to underwrite some of the things in the library; I helped to underwrite student support for a number of things, so it was—

Crawford: That’s a huge honor, isn’t it Olly? Who has it now?

Wilson: Right after I had it was Bonnie Wade.
Crawford: Ethnomusicology.

Wilson: Ethnomusicology. Then—

Crawford: So, they really try to spread it around.

Wilson: It’s three years, keep it for three years. Now David Wessel has it. So that’s been the history of the chair. It goes around back and forth from composer to scholar.

Crawford: I should say, but it’s meant to allow you to compose.

Wilson: It’s meant to allow you—also you can use the money to help you buy a leave. For example, you accrue leave from the university at the rate of—for every year you get one half of a semester off, which means—it’s a little bit more like two-thirds of a semester off. At any rate, at the end of six years you will have accrued two-thirds of a year off, but the other third, where’s the other third going to come from? If you have this chairman and you have another grant from somewhere, you can apply for that and then give yourself the full salary, because nobody can live off of two-thirds of their income, you know, because you’re committed to so many things. So you can get that additional third.

Crawford: That’s in addition to a sabbatical leave?

Wilson: Sabbatical leave gives you two-thirds of your salary gratis, because you’ve worked for six years. So at the end of that, at the end of those six years, you can take a year off with two-thirds pay. You can also apply to something called the Humanities Research Grant—this is primarily for junior faculty—and you can get the other third. When you get to senior faculty, your salary is high and—because I used to be chair of that committee—and what happens is that you say, “Is it really right to give this senior professor who is very celebrated and you’re paying one-third of his salary, but with that one-third of his salary you could pay three junior professors and they really need it more because they are less likely to get a major external grant.” Whereas with a senior person you might get an external grant or something from somewhere. The chair, for example, which you’re only gonna get if you’re a senior person, is something that you can use to pay yourself for part of the time.

Crawford: Is this for the most esteemed chair? It must be.

Wilson: Yes. That’s the most distinguished chair, and the only chair that we have in the department like that. I’ll give you the name—

Crawford: I like that it addresses the rivalry between musicologists and composers. It’s a handy way of dealing with that.
Wilson: All of that history of that is really important. But it’s not written that way, it’s just common sense. There will come a time when, just human nature being the way it is, when some people say, “Well we should use—.” There have been all kinds of ideas about how we should use that chair. “We should use it to recruit people; we should use that money and don’t give it to one person, five it someone who wants to come.” We said, “Whoa, wait a minute! Wait a minute, come on!” It’s viewed as a reward for those who have done distinguished work and who have been committed to the institution—

Crawford: As it should be.

Wilson: Not necessarily something to attract somebody because you think need somebody—you can use other funds for that. But don’t use this chair for that, at least that’s my feeling.

Crawford: That’s good.

Wilson: But I’m not involved in it anymore, so who knows what they’ll do.

Crawford: You wrote a piece the year before Hold On for Kurt Mazur, or for the New York Philharmonic, in any case. Is that a piece stands—.

Wilson: No. I wrote a piece for the New York Philharmonic. It was called “Shango Memory,” that was a New York Philharmonic commission. That was important. That was a New York Philharmonic commission which was important in terms of having—New York Philharmonic was celebrating its 100th anniversary, and they commissioned maybe 20 composers from all over the world. Some composers like Elliott Carter and people of that stature were commissioned twenty minute pieces or something. Other composers were commissioned ten minutes or between five and ten minutes. I was somewhere in the ten minute group. So that was fine. Because I knew they were trying to—and there may have been more than twenty composers; there may have been more like thirty composers, forty composers. It was something that was going to run for four or five years. And I thought that was really nice. So there were number of different premiers that occurred at that time.

Crawford: That was a significant honor, isn’t it?

Wilson: That was a significant honor and I was very pleased that I was part of that. That piece was very successful, because that piece was premiered by New York Philharmonic but was premiered by the conductor of the Detroit Symphony. Because Mazur really didn’t do many [ ]; the Mazurs really didn’t care much about contemporary music.

Crawford: Old school German.
Wilson: Yeah, yeah. There were a few things, supposedly Bach’s specials and all that. So they had a number of guest conductors, and besides, even if he had been a great supporter of contemporary music and done every piece, it would have been hard for him to do them all.

Crawford: Those were given to guests.

Wilson: So as a result they brought out a conductor who had conducted—my names are gone. I think the wine has gone—.

Crawford: [chuckles] The Detroit conductor?

Wilson: What’s his name? Let me get this [rises to look for name] Now it’s bothering me now that I can’t think of it.

Crawford: I’m sorry, I wish I had it in my notes, but I don’t.

Pausing here to go get some research materials coming right back [interview interruption]. Find it?

Wilson: Yeah. Why don’t you keep that. Do you have a copy of that? If you don’t, you should.

Crawford: I do. I just didn’t bring everything. This isn’t quite up to date, or is it? Because this surely should go into the book. This is a good thing to have.

[long pause]

Wilson: Okay. {Naimy Yarvey?}. How could I ever forget his name because he was a guest conductor there and he conducted the New York Philharmonic at that time. He conducted the premiere of the piece, five performances. They really did it well and I was wined and dined and it was really first-class. {Naimy Yarvey?} liked the piece so much he said, “I want to do this piece next year in Detroit.” Fine. So then he did the piece in Detroit. Then, I got a call from {MTT?} who said, “I heard about your piece that the New York Philharmonic did and I’d like to hear the piece because we might want to do it in San Francisco.” Sent it off; I got a call and he said, “Okay, we’re going to do it next year.” So, that piece was done by the New York Philharmonic, Detroit, and then San Francisco. I think it has been done somewhere else, as well. At least those are the places, in quick succession. So that was really, that was a positive way.

Crawford: That’s great, word of mouth!

Wilson: Word of mouth, people heard about the good reviews and everything and so everything worked really well with that piece. So that’s one that what happened is what you want to happen and hope that it continues be that way.
Now the orchestra piece that is most frequently done is *Lumina*, which was commissioned by American Composers Orchestra.

Crawford: Was that for the Cabrillo Festival?

Wilson: No, that was before, that was in New York first. *Sinfonia* was done in the Cabrillo.

Crawford: Oh, so it was *Sinfonia*.

Wilson: Yes, with Dennis Russell Davies, but Dennis Russell Davies did *Lumina*, the original performance of *Lumina*. And he did it in New York. Where was it? I think it was at Alice Tully. Then that piece was picked up and done by a lot of different people.

Crawford: Yes, that’s really had its run.

Wilson: It was done in St. Louis and Cleveland and, you know, New York and—

Crawford: Is that a piece that you liked very much.

Wilson: Yeah. I liked that piece very much, too. And it’s frequently performed. Often, what orchestras do if they record a piece, or they record a concert, then they’ll put it on the radio. So that a lot of people have heard that piece of mine because it’s been done by so many so many different orchestras that the orchestras would play back that concert or individual pieces of it.

Crawford: So it helps a lot.

Wilson: It helps a lot.

Crawford: That’s a particularly accessible piece, isn’t it?

Wilson: Well, yeah, parts of it are, parts of it are. But see, I think all of my music is accessible, [chuckles] but parts of it, the opening is—I wouldn’t describe it as accessible, because it starts out with a big clash cluster. Orchestrationally, it’s sort of very provocative because people are, “where are these sounds coming from?” Things are electronic and things are not. It’s all just a straight orchestra. But, in the middle of it there’s a melodic line, which goes out of that very first cluster that you heard, so that it’s the whole idea of generating, creating something that—what happens subsequently is generated by what happens at a particular moment. So that’s sort of fundamental to what I try to do. And yet the manifestation of that varies so that in this particular piece, there are four notes, a perfect fourth, and then a minor third in between, but if you play those notes together, especially in a certain range in the orchestra, it sounds like a cluster. I called it *Lumina*, because I was looking at the idea of trying to create a sonic analogue to the concept of luminosity, the idea of
something glowing white, growing out of a central point. This sort of quality
that something is emanating from a central point, sort of glowing.

Crawford: Yeah, it does glow.

Wilson: So that’s what I was trying to do, how to figure out how to do that. And I had
a lot of fun working on that. Because when you write for an orchestra piece—
well, it’s true of any piece, but particularly an orchestra piece because you
have to imagine the entire orchestra, you have to imagine when it’s done.
Certainly, skill and experience has a lot to do with it. The more you’ve heard,
the more scores you study, then you know a certain kind of thing. If you want
to sound like Mozart and Haydn or Beethoven, you understand the difference
between the way they approached the orchestra: with a Wagnerian orchestra,
look at a Mahlerian orchestra, you look at a {Jukard?} Srauss orchestra, you
look at a Stravinsky orchestra. Notice the orchestras get bigger and bigger,
you’ve got a wider range of palates and so forth. So you can play with all of
that, but you’re also constrained. Nobody’s going to ask you to write a piece
and it’s going to have all of the kinds of things that “Rite of Spring” has.
That’s really extraordinary, nobody’s going to do that. You’re not going to
have eight horns and that kind of things. [chuckles] But you’re going to have a
standard brass section and so forth. Now, you might request to use a little but
more or a little bit less, but that all costs money and that’s all complicated, as
we said, it all gets down to money at a certain level. Unless you’re very lucky.
I’ve had my instances of being lucky and instances in which it was really
penny-pinching, too. [laughter]

Crawford: Of course, like everybody else.

Wilson: Right.

Crawford: Well, let’s look at tributes. I don’t think I asked you about your work at the
American Academy? Did we talk very much about that?

Wilson: I don’t think so.

Crawford: That’s a big tribute to a composer, isn’t it, and you’ve had that. Describe that a
little—

Wilson: Yeah. The American Academy is an academy, as you know, which is
designed to support contemporary arts in all of the fields: literature, painting,
sculpture, architecture, which is interesting, music. And it’s an exciting thing
because the Academy, the members of the Academy, they are limited by only
so many seats that they can have. There used to be something that was called
the Institute—well, I don’t even want to go into that. But the point is there are
so many seats that they have and until somebody dies there’s not—I think
music might have—
Crawford: Well, isn’t there a chair every year or a composer in residence all the time?

Wilson: No. What happens is that the Academy consists of the members. Now, the members get together and then the members then award awards. It’s a big awards ceremony every May.

Crawford: Do you apply for this?

Wilson: No, somebody recommends you and you have to be voted on by the entire membership. Okay, let me give you something. This will be interesting.

Crawford: Is it like the Prix de Rome? Is it the American counterpart somehow?

Wilson: Well, not exactly. [from a distance as he walks into a different part of the house and retrieves something]

Crawford: Okay.

[interview interruption]

Wilson: That’s the picture that—[showing picture]

Crawford: Oh yes. That’s something I wanted to ask you about, this is something different with Schuller and {Isaw?} and {Joan Tower?}—

Wilson: Schuller and Joan Tower.

Crawford: Wow, what a group, huh?

Wilson: Interesting group.

Crawford: That’s actually my next question: What does that represent?

Wilson: You can take it and put it in the book. And in the front of this, I think it talks about members and who they are.

Crawford: That’s a very prestigious grouping. American Academy of Arts and Letters is what we’re looking at.

Wilson: And writers. I mean if you look at the literature people, if you look at all of the people who are in it, it’s really a fabulous group to even be associated with. The major writers of your time.

Crawford: I should say. Well, I’ve been to the Academy in Rome, so I know what it looks like and I can imagine—

Wilson: But this is different. The American Academy, this is the American Academy here. The American Academy in Rome is something different, which is
another interesting story. The Academy here is a group of artists who give awards to other artists and, you know, they elect. I guess the closest thing is like the American Movie Academy or something like that, where there really is a group of people who are elected. But the membership of the people is limited to so many people. And every year they, if there are vacancies—see if nobody dies—the average age of the American Academy is probably—

Crawford: In Rome is what we’re talking about?

Wilson: No. The American Academy is what we’re talking about. The American Academy is totally different.

Crawford: Oh, I didn’t realize that. And somebody has to die?

Wilson: Yes, and there’s an edifice in New York on West 155th Street. It’s been existing since the turn of the century, and what happens is that Kurt Vonnegut or you name a major writer, they’re there; you mention a major painter, they’re usually there. Some people aren’t because of aesthetic bias this way or that way, but for the most part it’s a broad group. And so they give awards to young composers, young writers, young and not-so-young people for a lifetime work. But they also elect people—the highest award is to be elected to the group. I was really surprised and elated when I was elected to this in ‘95. What happens is you go there and it’s one of the biggest parties you’ve ever had. It has a museum and a—

Crawford: Where is it, Olly?

Wilson: It’s in New York on 155th Street on the West Side, right near the river. Well you just look through that book at the names of the people. [laughter]

Crawford: This is so much fun, the gold medal awards. Everybody is here from Edward Hopper to Henry Macon, how about that?

Wilson: Exactly, exactly. You’ve got the whole range: John Updike, you know, you mentioned it. They’re all there. Now, composers the same thing. Major composers: Elliott Carter all the way to—from the Copeland days on, there are American composers who’ve developed some esteem. And since you are voted on by your peers to be elected there, it means that somebody else who’s also a composer thinks you’re doing something right, so it’s really quite a thing. Most people aren’t elected until at least late middle age. Some people are elected fairly early, but for the most part people are in their fifties or older before they’re elected. Some people never get elected. Inevitable, there are some people who should have been in but weren’t. Since it’s also supported by money, a lot of the money that it has to give away comes from the royalties of composers. For example, Charles Ives, all of his estate when he died, his wife turned over I guess when she died, she turned over everything to the Academy. The Ives’ funds enables us to give Ives fellowships, scholarships,
and an award for lifetime work to composers every year. So the members of the Academy come together, there are four meetings a year—most people don’t come unless you’ve been elected an officer. I’ve been elected an officer this year, so now I’m a vice president of the American Academy. I was just informed of that last month. So for the next three years—and it’s a rotating thing—I think I’m succeeding the position that I think John {Corigiano?} had. So I’ll be vice president representing music for the next three years.

Crawford: That’s just wonderful. That’s about the biggest honor you can be given, isn’t it?

Wilson: Yeah! It’s really, really great. You look at all the people, and to be associated with all these people really is——

Crawford: And this is lifetime, so you’re there forever.

Wilson: Also, what we do is we get together for meetings to review the works of nominees. You can nominate young composers. I’ve nominated young composers.

Crawford: Who’d you nominate, if you can say?

Wilson: I was fortunate this year. Several of the people I nominated got awards, will get awards at a big party we’re having in May. There was a one composer whose name was {Kerril Makin?}, who was a student at Berkeley.

Crawford: How was her last name?

Wilson: His name.

Crawford: Oh, his name.

Wilson: Kerril Makin [spells]. He was one of the ones. He’s getting a fellowship.

Crawford: He’s getting a fellowship on your nomination.

Wilson: The fellowships are usually like $15,000, I mean usually $7,500 to write a piece and then $7,500 to help get a piece recorded. I nominated Cindy Cox before; Cindy Cox has gotten an award. I nominated Ed Campion—you know from college; Ed Campion got an award several years ago. This year Kerril Makin got an award. Who else got an award this year?

Crawford: But they’re not members; they’re awardees. But you’re a member.

Wilson: There’s a composer, a young composer at Oberlin that I recommended who got an award, I’m just forgetting names today. But——
Wilson: So at the turn of the century, the American industrialists who were really becoming multimillionaires—the Vanderbilts, the Fords, the Stanfords, and J.P. Morgan—those people went to Europe as when you are wealthy like that, you travel around. They saw all these other academies and they said, “Where’s the American Academy?” and so they said the government’s not going to pay for that, so they said, “We need to have an American Academy because we’ve got great artists too.” So they got together and created the American Academy around the turn of the century. And J.P. Morgan particularly, went to Rome and the Seven Hills of Rome and looked around said, “What’s over on this hill?” and they said, “Oh, that’s {Gian Niccolo?} hill.” He said, “Well, let’s build our academy here. We’ll just pay ‘em!” So they bought up land, beautiful land, and at that time they were able to get it for decent prices. So they bought up a ton of land there and had the academy designed and part of the exterior of the academy—that’s why it sort of has this medieval, not so much medieval, but Renaissance look. When you walk through those gates of the American Academy, you walk through that corridor, and on your right there’s a big plaque. And it says who all these people are. There’s the J.P Morgans and Rockefeller and Vanderbilt and all those people had a lot of money, so they put it together, they created the endowment. And then from time to time they would have to raise more money and so forth, but there’s a big endowment that they have.

Now the idea here is this is the place that allows American artists, writers, architects, and scholars to come and live in Rome and do work in Rome. So you go there and you do what you do. Now the way they do it is by awarding a Prix de Rome, or a prize of Rome. There’s a board and they get together and they say, “Okay, who—?” And you apply for that, and they determine whose going to be the Prix de Rome winners or the Rome fellows, it’s the same thing. So you get to be American Academy in Rome fellows. Now, I went to Rome in 1987, I think it was 1987 or 1988. And I had the Guggenheim Fellowship and this was my second Guggenheim Fellowship. I had spent the first Guggenheim fellowship living in Africa, and I wanted to live in Europe. I had visited Europe, but I wanted to live in Europe for a while. When we had visited Europe we had always liked France and Italy and different parts of England and so forth, but we really liked Rome. Amsterdam is always interesting, too. But we really liked Rome and I liked the Italians.

Crawford: That has to be the best year of your life just living in Rome and writing.

Wilson: Oh, it was beautiful. So they said, “Okay.” And Andrew Imbrie who had been a Rome fellow, I asked him about living in Italy and about getting a house and that sort of thing. And he said, “Well, you know, the Rome Academy has so much property that they have apartments that they rent out from time to time, some of them actually in the Academy.” I said, “Oh, fine, let me write them!” So I wrote them, and they said “Yes, we do have an apartment in {Villa
CaraViglo?} which is right across the street. The Rome Academy is on {Villa Messina?}. And right across the street is Villa Caraviglio. This is beautiful three story place and there’s just a beautiful sculpture garden outside and on the other side there’s a fountain that’s out in the street. You know how it is in Italy. You’ve got these walls around it and you don’t really know it until you open the door and go in there. That’s the way this place was. So they said, “We have an apartment there for rent and this is what might be available at that time.” They said, “Can you send us something about yourself? You say you are a composer.” So I sent my vita. They said, “Oh! You’re a distinguished composer; we’d like to make you a visiting artist.” Fine, I said, “What does that mean?” “What that means is that you’ll be able to participate in anything we do in the Academy. We ask the visiting artists to participate in lectures they want to. We ask them also to make at least one presentation about their work.”

But see, the other reason I wrote there is that I didn’t just want an apartment, I wanted a studio I could work in. And they had a studio there that they rented it out. They said, “We’ll rent you this studio; we’ll rent you this apartment; we’ll make you a visiting artist; and you can participate in everything.”

Crawford: But no obligation to write a work?

Wilson: No obligations, no obligations. I was obligated to write because when I was there, I was working on a commission from somebody. I can’t remember what it was now but it was a piece, it must have been about ‘78. This was the second sabbatical, because the first one was from 1971 to 1972, and this was 1978 to 1979.

Crawford: But you had a separate status? Most of the composers who go there do write a piece, don’t they?

Wilson: Oh, yes. Most of the people that go over there are fellows or Prix de Rome holders. Usually younger composers, younger than I was at the time, usually in the early part of their career, usually thirties.

Crawford: Because I think it would be so interesting to look at a catalogue of the composers who have written there and figure out performance history. Wouldn’t that be interesting?

Wilson: It would be interesting to do that. And there are usually two composers a year. Matter of fact, the composers that were there that year were {John Thau?} you know from here. And what the other guy’s name? A composer that lives in New York. I’ve forgotten his name now. Who is really well-known now. He seems relatively bright.

Crawford: So they kind of turn in a work when they finish that year.
Wilson: Yeah, they just describe what they’ve done. Some people write a piece; some people write several pieces. And at the time at the American Academy of Rome, I think they were staying for two years. Because it takes about six months just to get there. So you usually stay for a couple of years.

Crawford: You can buy your dinner.

Wilson: Right. So that was great, because it was an interesting community of scholars and artists and so forth. As a matter of fact, there were painters and architects and composers and writers and poets. Poets! That was the other thing because poets were an important part of that. I think poets get less of an opportunity for these kinds of things than some of the other artists. This was one of the places where they were, a lot of interesting poets were there.

Crawford: That’s great, it just sounds idyllic to me.

Wilson: Then what happens is that once a week somebody’s giving a presentation about their work, but that’s in all the fields, so if you find some artist and you like their work, you go and hear them talk about their work.

Crawford: Those are open to the public I think.

Wilson: They’re open to the public, yeah. It’s an academy in the sense that there’s a group of people who are there. And there’s a Board in New York. And a resident President who lives there, and it’s usually was a scholar from the United States. As a matter of fact, the scholar who was the director of the place was {John Dorms?}, who was a professor in classics from the University of Michigan. My son at that time was about thirteen years old, and his son was the same age, and there’s a tennis court so they used to play tennis. It turns out that my son is an extraordinarily good tennis player, he really is definitely really very good. This other kid that he played was a very nice kid, very bright kid, and he liked to play tennis, but he just didn’t have the skills that my son had in terms of playing tennis. My son was on the tennis team at Bishop O’Dowd and that was one of the best tennis teams in the time. He was like the sixth player, so it was really tough. He had all this experience. Well, this other guy liked to play, but it was like me playing tennis—I’m not a great tennis player. At any rate, his father was so competitive that he used to look out the window and watch his son play and give him a hard time he would lose to Kent. But he would lose to Kent all the time because he just didn’t have the skills. [laughs]

Crawford: Well, that made the year for your son, because it’s kind of hard to take them away.

Wilson: That’s right, it was tough, it was tough. Although, it was exciting! They both went to the overseas school in Rome. See, this is the reason I am forever dedicated to Guggenheim. I’m on the education advisory committee for the
Guggenheim Foundation. The reason why I’m dedicated to Guggenheim: not only did they award me two fellowships, but that second fellowship I got in ’78 and I went there—our kids, our daughter was seventeen and in high school. And she had to sit for the SAT in the fall when she came in. She was a junior she was coming to take the SAT in the fall of her senior year. We said, “You’ve got to go to an English-speaking school, because it would be great if you could go to Italian schools, but you don’t know Italian, it’s going to take you a year to learn it, and you need to keep up with all this other stuff you have to do. So we figured out where the place to go was: Overseas School in Rome, which is a school designed for diplomats, American industrialists, and rich Italians who want their kids to go to American universities. We said, “That’s the place for her,” so that’s where she went. But that cost more money than certainly we were paying here where both of them were in public schools. So we get there and we put that in our grant application to Guggenheim. I think it was like $2,000 or something like that, which at that time seemed like a lot of money. But what happened is that once we got there, they raised the tuition, so it was another $2,000. So it must have been $3,000 or something. We’re going, “Wow, where are we going to get $2,000 from?” This was way beyond what our budget would cover. So I wrote Guggenheim back and said, “Look, I’ve got this problem. My kids are here. We planned for the year. I either cut off the year for a time which I don’t want to do because I want to spend the whole year there and so forth, and I’m asking you if you can assist me.” They sent me back a check for the $2,000 and didn’t ask any questions. I was like, “Oh my gosh, if they can do that, anytime they ask me to do anything—-

Crawford: You will serve.

Wilson: [laughs] So I have served a lot for Guggenheim.

Crawford: And your lucky kids.

Wilson: Yeah.

Crawford: What an experience!

Wilson: It was great for them! It was marvelous.

Crawford: Well, Olly, I wanted to ask you to reflect for a moment on academia as a grounding for you as a composer. I know you’ve said it’s a great patron of music. Was Berkeley and the Berkeley music department a good climate?

Wilson: Berkeley music department was an excellent climate for me at the time. I say that because I think that any institution is a reflection of the chemistry between the people who are part of it. I felt that Berkeley was really very supportive in two ways: first, as a composer, what you want to do is have the time to work; and as a person who’s interested in ideas, you want to be
stimulated by what’s going on. You want to be around people who have interesting ideas, challenging ideas, and who are articulate in expressing them. Because that’s the ideal of the academic enterprise: to learn, to grow, to learn yourself, and also to be stimulated by people who are more experienced than you are, to look up to people for their scholarship, and also to be pushed by young people who are bright and inquiring and are devoted to ideas and devoted to learning and devoted to art and devoted to music. So on those grounds Berkeley was that and I felt really fortunate to be there. I felt it was a place that I also contributed to that atmosphere. I came from Oberlin. And Oberlin was very interesting and very good from a music point of view because you had all of these extraordinarily talented kids who were around who would just play anything, and were willing and anxious to do so. The cognitive side of music was not focused on that much. We may have talked a bit about the totem pole, that is, the hierarchy in the conservatory and how that differs from the university. In the university, the music department was focused around the cognitive studies of music.

Crawford: Not performance?

Wilson: Not performance. But everybody recognizes that you can’t have music without performance, so that there was performance, but it was—

Crawford: Was there adequate performance of your music?

Wilson: Yeah. I think what happened was that when I came there, we—by that I mean a group of young composers at that time consisting of myself, Ed Dugger, Fred {Laroff?} who was there, and Richard {Feliciano?}. Richard was a little bit older but you know, he had come to Berkeley the year before I came, and he also was new at Berkeley. So we had four relatively young composers. Fred {Lardoff} had been there a year too; Ed had been there a year or so before I came. So when I first came here, in 1970, there were four young composers who were about my age. We all were interested in having performances—not only so much of our music, because our careers were going relatively well and we were getting performances elsewhere—but we felt that it was really critical that students have good performances of their pieces. Not just other students performing. Although it was good for the other students to perform pieces and face the challenges that contemporary composers place in their music. So we created Berkeley Contemporary Chamber Players. The idea was to use a student and professional group because there was an excellent reservoir of outstanding performers here. And so we put that together and we started out with at least one concert a semester, because we figured for costs that was about all we can afford.

Crawford: And that was student word primarily?

Wilson: That was student work and faculty work.
Crawford: Apart from the noon concerts?

Wilson: Apart from the noon concerts. Then we also got the—The noon concerts had been going on.

Crawford: Who started this? Joe Kerman or—?

Wilson: I think it might have started when Joe Kerman was chair.

Crawford: I think Joaquin Nin-Culmell claims them.

Wilson: I don’t know. I really don’t know who really started them, but they were an institution by the time I got here. As part of that, composers had their works performed, that is, every semester, a concert of contemporary music by the graduate students. Then, from time to time, an enterprising undergraduate would organize a group of things and they would also do things. Sometimes at a noon concert, more often on just an ad hoc concert. But the Berkeley Contemporary Chambers Players was a professional group. We hired people who were professional musicians to do it. The formula was that we would do some of our own music; we would do music that we thought was interesting; and we would also do, from time to time, student music. But there wasn’t a student piece played at every concert, but from time to time. There wasn’t a faculty piece played on every concert, but from time to time. More frequently it was a forum for faculty, but the bulk of the pieces were not either faculty or students; they were contemporary music by the students and the general public. So, we got that going. We originated that group and that was an important development that occurred. So that was a forum for us to play here.

Plus, about that time, or shortly thereafter, other groups began to develop in the community. San Francisco Contemporary Music Players started in the early seventies so that you had another professional, fully professional association that had no association at all with any university. So that was also good. And there were other groups that subsequently followed, but that was a—so this gave you a forum in which you could have your work performed.

Crawford: And you feel good about that.

Wilson: I felt good about that. But the university itself first provided something that was extremely important. It provided stability and security. As an artist, because I discovered early on that I wanted to be a composer, I knew one patron of the composer was the university. I figured what do you have to do to get the support of that patron. I don’t think I was exactly quite that calculating at the time, because I knew that if you wanted to have opportunities, then you should maximize your education. Undergraduate school, when I went to university, I didn’t even know I wanted to be a composer, but I knew I wanted to do something in music, and I knew that there was a music major part of the path, so I followed that. It was during that period that I discovered that I
wanted to be a composer, and then I knew I had to go to graduate school and this was the time when the Ph.D. was beginning to be required. Up to that point, a Master’s degree, if you had a Master’s degree in composition, then you were eligible. That was the entry-level degree requirement for teaching. It was that period, late fifties, early sixties, that this began to change and the paradigm began to require a doctorate of some kind, a PhD, {DMA}, or whatever they called it.

I was right on the cusp of that development and I figured I had better work toward a PhD. So that’s why I got the first job at Florida A&M in August, but then while I was there, I realized I really wanted to have more opportunities; I realized I had to get the Ph.D. Now, there’s a socialization process that occurs, that means that I spent all my life from age eighteen and now I’m age—by the time I got the PhD, I’m twenty-four. It seemed a long time then, but if you think about it, it wasn’t that long. [chuckles] But it’s six years. Six years, that’s all I’ve been doing. [clanking] Then I started teaching, and all of the rest of my life for the next—let’s see, I finished the PhD in 1964, so from 1964 and I finished college in 1959. So from that period I had been in school and had done some teaching as a graduate assistant and then I got the first job at Florida A&M in 1960. So it was really fairly young to do that, but it gave me a quick insight into what was going on and I knew that I had to do the degree. Then I loved teaching.

Crawford: You did, didn’t you? And all the rest of it too.

Wilson: I love teaching and all of the other things that went with it. I look back on my life as being stimulated environment where there were interesting ideas, provocative discussions and all those kinds of things. I thought this was great.

Crawford: This was the kind of support you were looking for.

Wilson: Exactly the kind of support I needed. And then also to be in a situation where there’s an audience, though small and esoteric, there was an audience for what I did. So that also gave me support. So it seemed the perfect thing to do.

Crawford: I’ve run into the idea that UC wanted to clone young composers, that is, maybe not intentionally, but young students coming along would say, “I want to write like Olly Wilson”? Did you discourage that or did you just leave it alone?

Wilson: Well, I think what I always tried to do as a teacher—and all the colleagues I know I think also shared this view—that composition is such a rarified thing that if you have something to say it is because it is unique. It is because you have a particular voice that expresses your experience in a particular way. So, to have somebody else copy that is a prescription for disaster. By the time I got to Berkeley, there was nothing—I mean, there were people who were considered really extraordinary teachers like Andrew Imbrie, who was in the
tradition of Roger Sessions—but there was not either from Imbrie or anybody else I knew—Joaquin Nin-Culmell was still there; Andrew Imbrie; Arnold Elston was there. He was a composer who had been through Vienna, had studied in the Weberian style. There was Bill Denny, who was there, who had spent some time in Europe, probably more influenced by the French style—we can talk about that. There was somebody by the name of Custer who was there, who was gone by the time I got there. But then there were the group of four composers that I had—

Crawford: And you all got along very well?

Wilson: We got along well. There were no wars. There were no aesthetic wars. We were different.

Crawford: You supported each other?

Wilson: We supported each other. We respected each other. We were different. We were different styles. I mean you hear Bill Denny’s music, you hear Andrew Imbrie’s music, it’s very, very different. You hear Arnold Elston’s music, you hear Joaquin Nin-Culmell’s music, it’s different.

Crawford: It couldn’t have been more different.

Wilson: Or you look at—

Crawford: You didn’t have a minimalist, though, on the faculty, did you?

Wilson: No. Now. There were no minimalists, no minimalists. But remember minimalism was just hitting the fan. Minimalism was just being developed, you know, late sixties, early seventies. MC, when was MC written?

Crawford: MC, Terry Riley, I don’t even know.

Wilson: Late sixties, something like that, middle sixties at the earliest. At any rate, it was the idea of that. So anything that is that new, especially with a special aesthetic stance, the kind of aesthetic stance that that had, is not going to hit it in the Academy because in the Academy the filtering process that is just built in at any academy is that you listen to everything that’s out there and then you try to choose what you think is best. Aesthetics are formed by experience and so there are certain biases that people have. That’s because of their experiences and so forth. It’s only when somebody doing something really different comes along and is convincing in that difference. It’s not because it is different, but because it’s convincing. That usually takes some time to develop. There weren’t any minimalists then, there were certainly people influenced by the minimalist style now, but that just reflects that paradigm that I talked about. But there was respect and I didn’t get the sense that there was a litmus test that anybody had. There were composers who in those years
who were serialists—Arnold Elston is still very much a serialist. There were
composers who were the opposite of serialists like Joaquin Nin-Culmell. And
there were people who were influenced one way—modernists—or another, by
serialism.

Crawford: So it was a broad base. You feel that it was a broad base, not narrow.

Wilson: Although the perception of it has always been, even today its valid to—some
people think of Berkeley, because its Berkeley, as being a place that’s, “Oh
it’s very, it only does this kind of thing, it only does that.” They’ll mention
one or two names and that might be what those people do, but they forget all
these other people who are there. It’s just like when people reflect on the
sixties, talking about contemporary music in the sixties, well, “Everybody had
to write serialism.” That was an attitude that some people had, but there were
thousands—the majority of composers who could care less, you know.

Now, yet it is true about a school. For example, I don’t think Berkeley is a
good fit for it. Sessions might have been—I met him a couple of times, but I
didn’t really know him. But Yale, at the time, when I was in undergraduate
school, Hindemith was at Yale. And Hindemith really did have a view of what
was right and wrong in contemporary music. He wrote the book *The Craft of
Musical Composition*. He articulates what that view is. He talks about how
you set up dissonance in this way and you can only use so much and you do—
this kind of thing. So he had a clear view of that. And it was finite. He could
go through your work and he could say this is better than this. And it was
supported by at least a theoretical framework that he had created, okay. So
Yale was the place where of you wanted to learn how to write, meaning write
like Hindemith, you would go.

Crawford: That was understood?

Wilson: That’s right. I mean if you wanted to work with the great master, you’d go to
that. Now, a lot of composers, in order to develop their craft—it’s like writing;
it’s like painting; it’s like architecture—often you take the apprenticeship
route because in the absence of knowing what to rebel against, you don’t
really know it and you can reinvent the wheel. Whereas if you sit at the foot of
somebody who you consider good, then you might learn that. Now, eventually
you know that in order to be a significant composer, you’ve got to develop
your own way, you know, to reach Nirvana. [laughs] But for some people, it’s
important have some good models. That’s why, in the 17th and 18th century
and earlier in Western music, often people studied scores by being copiers for
people. So that you worked for a Hayden or a Mozart or all of the thousands
of other composers who were not Hayden or Mozart, and you learned their
styles. So you could learn how they did it and then parlay that into what
you’re doing. We do that in a systematic way up to a certain extent, except we
call it music theory or harmony, when you’re sort of learning a certain style—
even studying Bach chorales, you know.
Now, that’s one thing that Berkeley did do. Berkeley did have the attitude that if you want to learn theory, you’ve really got to deal with music. You just can’t talk about it. You’ve got to do it. To do that you have to have certain skills, and you’re going to have to jump through hoops to do that. That’s one of the things that we do. Now some people who don’t like to jump through hoops hate that—

Crawford: Who doesn’t do that? All the music schools do that. Write a fugue, write a—

Wilson: How to write a fugue, write harmony, write a chorale, you know, that’s sort of standard. But, around the sixties though, a lot of people began to question that, because the sixties were an age of questioning and everything. “Well, why do we need to do what was done 200 years ago? Why don’t we just explore and just write music.” Now, I was at Oberlin, and I was young at Oberlin. I was twenty-six years old when I’m teaching at Oberlin. So we have that issue, that big issue, in the faculty. My position was somewhere in between. Yes, we ought to have opportunities for people to sort of be able to explore themselves and work outside of the canon. But you really need to know the canon, too, if you’re really going to understand any of it. It’s a push and pull. Shortly after, a lot of institutions dropped, for example, the study of chorales, dropped having to write part of it—

Crawford: In the sixties.

Wilson: In the late sixties, in the seventies, and beyond. So that there are some places that you could go and get a degree where you don’t do that at all. Now, the extreme example is Cal Arts, where they just don’t deal with that cannon anymore. They do whatever they want to do. Which is fine, but the problem is that some of the people already understood that and understood what they’re rebelling against or while they’re moving against these models, do okay. But some of the people get lost completely because they think they’re doing something and they don’t understand what some of their [unintelligible].

Crawford: It’s like writing English with no grammar.

Wilson: Exactly. It’s like that. Sort of making it up yourself. Now, an inventive person can come up with some interesting stuff that way and be unshackled by the presuppositions because of the things that they found, but that’s rare, that’s very rare. Most people have to go through that or at least some of it in order to understand how that works. Then they say, “Oh yeah, fine, I understand how this works.” Sometimes that understanding is not something you can verbalize very clearly, and people don’t even understand what they don’t understand. So it’s a problem.

Crawford: It’s much harder, I think. It’s looser. Cal Arts is where? Valencia?

Crawford: Olly, as an African American composer you were always asked, “How can we see the African American tradition in your music?” Were you asked this too much? Did you sometimes just want people not to ask you?

Wilson: I think to a certain extent. But on the other hand, not really. It depends on who asks the question and what the context was. If, for example—I think it’s a legitimate question when a person goes to hear your music and they wonder, “Where did this come from?” and especially if they haven’t heard much contemporary music and they don’t know what the sources of this are and they’re saying, “Where does this music come from anyway?” and “You’re an African American person and you’re obviously proud of it. [laughs] You talk about it all the time. But I don’t hear anything in your music that has anything to do with African American music. Are you an African American or have you just adapted something else?” And I say, “Well, part of the problem is frame of reference: what defines African American music? Do you know what that is?” And no culture is static, and never has been. The rate of change has changed from time to time, is faster or slower at different points, but everything changes. So that you can’t presume, you can’t presume to first identify what is African American. If you expect me to do that which in your mind, particularly if your horizons are limited, is what you consider vestiges of African American music, if you consider some of the obvious things like blues, which clearly is; if you consider things like spirituals, which clearly is; or gospels, today a contemporary expression; or jazz being a contemporary expression, then that’s one thing. But the fact of the matter is that expression is broader and always has been than those particular genres that you describe. I’m a composer that lives at the latter part of the twentieth century, and first part of the twenty first century. And like all African Americans and any other ethnic group, I’m influenced by everything around me. So I make choices, but I don’t eschew anything. I don’t think that any artists really should or can. So, you choose what’s right for you. Then I’ll let other people deal with whether they think this is influenced by this or that. Now when I say that I don’t eschew anything, that means that I reflect on my own musical experiences and I know that there are certain things that are deeply rooted in the African American experience. Like the spiritual tradition. And if when you hear my music and you don’t hear any of that, then something’s wrong with your ears, as far as I’m concerned.

So, we can discuss this over and over again. We can discuss from different levels: with whom you’re having this discussion, what their background is, what their assumptions are as to how you deal with this. I’m usually not bothered by the question. The only few occasions where I feel some of the questions have been misplaced is when people make certain assumptions about you, which suggest a limited view of what the African American experience is. So I then I go into my lecture about that. [laughs]

Crawford: That was my question.
Wilson: Yeah.

Crawford: Well, that’s good. Dr. Wykes said of you, when I asked him about you career, he said something I liked so much. He said “Well, I would call it a gradual crescendo.” Is that fair?

Wilson: That’s fair. Sure.

Crawford: Good, good, so what else would you add here? Because this is the end of my questioning for today.

Wilson: I think that everybody’s a result of their times. Being born in 1937, and having lived through extraordinary changes in our society—from the impact of technology to dramatic social changes, to the growing internationalism, to the impact of so many extraordinary things that have happened in the sixty-five years I’ve been alive—I think I’ve been fortunate to have lived in a time when the world before that, the first forty years, the twentieth century had certain assumptions about the past in spite of things that people said about modernism and earlier.

But because I think change has been so exponential in this last period—I mean some scholars of change and time and knowledge talk about the fact that if you look at discoveries in so many fields of study, it’s really been in some respects in the last sixty years that people have learned much more, much faster than all the time that existed before. This is particularly true of technology and what that involves. And yet from the human point of view, there are certain aspects of being human which are different from that. You’re influenced by everything, but there are certain fundamental things about how you relate to other people, how you relate to existence, what you think existence is, and why you think it is important to try to live what we generally refer to in the West as an enriched life, that has been around a long time in a lot of different cultures absent the technological and the intellectual discoveries that have occurred here.

So you’ve got two hands: on one hand there’s the age-old problems of being human, of relating to people from the time homo sapiens became homo sapiens I guess. To today, when you hear about some of the things that go on today. Here we’re contemplating a war, which will mean, from my point of view, the needless death of millions of people—it could be millions of people, hopefully it won’t be anywhere near that. It seems to me that there are reasonable ways of dealing with this, if people would apply some of those obvious ways of dealing with the world, especially in the nuclear world, we would be a lot better off. But we haven’t learned the lessons, at least not sufficiently to avoid this. Seems to me that if we can do the kinds of things that we try to do, and people are willing to risk their lives, as in the Columbia space shuttle going to the moon and building space stations and colonizing the universe, it seems we could learn some basic things about human decency.
And those are the things that drive me. Because you’re an artist, I really deeply believe that you reflect on your experience and you try to do something which sort of tells something about your inner self so that other people will relate to it. I think that people relate to art because they resonate in certain ways to that which is meaningful. Something is communicated and it makes us both celebrate being human. And that’s important. If we did more of that and less of the territorial imperatives, we’d be a hell of a lot better off.

Crawford: Amen. That’s a good place to end.

[End Interview 6]
Interview 7: March 24, 2003

Wilmot: Olly Wilson, interview seven, March 24, 2003. Well, last time we got up through your time in Ghana. Now, we are back at Berkeley in 1972. I’ll start off by asking you about the administrative position that you took in 1974 as Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action, to the vice chancellor or chancellor?

Wilson: To the vice chancellor. No, I think, technically, it was Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action period and I think it was to the chancellor but really, operationally, I worked with the vice-chancellor. The vice chancellor was Michael Heyman, who subsequently became chancellor. Let me tell you a little bit about where I was academically then and how this position came to be.

I had returned from Ghana in 1972, and I think between ’72 and ’73, I came up for tenure. I had taught at Oberlin for five years prior and when I came to Berkeley I had the agreement that I would be reviewed within a couple of years after I had arrived here. That was an auspicious time for me because I also won my first Guggenheim Fellowship in ’71, which allowed us to go to Ghana in the first place.

So I came back and fortunately I had some performances and so forth and so on and so I did come up for tenure and I got tenure. Now, the reason why I mention that is that you know, in academia, in the academic world, the biggest single hurdle that one has, any faculty member who is on the ladder, that is a career faculty member, is going from the assistant professorship to the associate professorship, that is going across the barrier from being untenured to being tenured. This is important because this is where there is a serious assessment made of your academic promise and your academic potential. After that, if you’re successful in making this promotion, then the probability is that the university is committed to you as an employee, as long as the university exists and as long as you continue to produce and you don’t commit some cardinal sin that’s morally [wrong] or criminal [laughs], you have a job. It’s important in an academic institution to have that, because it really underscores and fosters academic freedom. That is, if you are writing something that’s controversial, you don’t have to be afraid well if you do that, the Regents are going to fire you or the Chancellor is going to fire you. Or that some political agency in some way will find whatever you are doing objectionable, either as an artist or as social commentator or scholar, and therefore limit or constrain your ideas. So that’s what the rationale is behind that. It really is a major step that you have to have as a scholar.

In that process, though, it became clear to me, and I think to many other African American faculty, that the tenure step was a very very difficult one, and even more difficult for so-called minority faculty. Difficult because there were other constraints on the behavior that you had. Constraints is not the right word. But there are more responsibilities that minority faculty and
women tend to assume because they are minority faculty. That is, because of this, and because the university wants to have a wide range of representation on any issue of the day, frequently [they] try to get a diverse group to study an issue. So you are asked to serve on an a disproportionate amount of committees.

As one of the few minority faculties, you often are sought out by graduate students and undergraduates, too, because they want to get your perspective, and sometimes they are minority students and they want some mentorship. And they want your particular perspective because they assume, sometimes rightly, sometimes wrongly, that your background is similar to theirs, and you have successfully gotten to this point, so therefore they want to know if you can help them. So that’s important. And that’s something that most of the faculty also feel. You know, they feel, “Look, I’ve been successful, somebody helped me; I have a responsibility to help people who come behind me.” So that’s given the context in which we live, the fundamental racist context in which most of us have grown up, to different degrees.

You have those factors and then you have the expectations from other colleagues, both positive and negative. Some assuming that you really aren’t qualified, permi fasci, simply because you’re a minority, and therefore you must be here for some time that has something to do with the social situation and not necessarily the academic situation.

The fact of the matter is that in the 1970s, when I came here, there was no affirmative action program. The term affirmative action was just being established, and it was usually ad hoc. Administrators would sometimes give lip service to this, “This is important. We should have a diverse community. We should seek out outstanding women and minorities and bring them to our faculty because it enriches the entire university.” So that was the general stance, but it was not a program or anything. On the other hand, this also occurred about the time that the Bakke [Bakke v. Regents of the University of California] case arose. I think that was 1970, 1971, or something like that.

Wilmot: I think it arose in that time, and then maybe it was ruled on in 1974.

Wilson: Maybe something like that, yeah. Okay, well, the thrust of that case was raising the arm of reverse discrimination and saying, “Look, if you privilege some people, then you are a priori, being unfair to the other people.” So it argues for a history-blind kind of egalitarianism. The counter argument to that is: how can you have a history of egalitarianism when you’ve got a race-conscious society and race-conscious history? You cannot possibly address hundreds of years of racism by pretending it doesn’t exist, by saying, “From now on everybody’s going to be equal. If you do that, then it’s like having a race where you have some people that have their one leg tied together. Because they have this whole legacy, this historical legacy and so forth, and
that affects behavior and patterns and a whole range of things: expectations, both internal and external.

So people were trying to come up with positive ways to deal with what was clearly a problem. A problem was that as the {Kerner} Commission argued, going back years ago, that the society was becoming more and more separate, and less equal. People said, “In order to address that, we must attack it a number of different ways.”

Since education has been the escalator, has been the means by which people are able to help themselves—and certainly has been a shining principle in the African American community that one should focus on education—it was a responsibility of educational institutions, particularly state institutions, and specifically land grant institutions, who are there at the behest of the population of taxpayers and of public interest and, hence, exist as a result of public interest and hence have a special responsibility. I would argue that all institutions do, but certainly there’s no question that land grant institutions have a responsibility to do that.

Now, intellectually there were a lot of people who about that time agreed with that to different degrees. The general populace was sort of apathetic about it in one way or the other. People often viewed the civil rights struggle as being something that happened in the sixties. A lot of the efforts that were made there had made some important changes: certainly the public rights, the public accommodation acts, the civil rights acts, and the end of de jure segregation, in particular, laws that existed in the South. So those were the big things. People assume that’s it. But the fact of the matter was that was only part of it and there were other deeper, more insidious problems that people had to deal with. People talked more about that and began to address that. And as a person in an institution like this, and being among the early small number of African American faculty, this was certainly very paramount in our interests.

After a number of conversations, particularly among African American faculty, Asian American, to some degree Chicano American [faculty], also small, people began to decide to caucus a little bit more, “Let’s talk to one another a little bit more, let’s see if we can come up with more ideas. And then after having done so, let’s then have an audience with the chancellor,” or the vice chancellor, because the vice chancellor is the person who is really responsible for the day-to-day operations of the council. It turned out that the vice chancellor at that point was Michael Heyman, Ira Michael Heyman, who was a professor of law, who had traditional democratic political leanings—he was identified that way—and who also was a person who had developed a reputation of being fair, even-minded, and committed to the goals of equal opportunity for faculty and students. Prior to becoming vice chancellor, he had been chair of the academic senate. He seemed like a decent person on this issue.
So the caucus of black faculty got together and met with Heyman and we laid out what we considered to be systematic ways in which the university had a number of different practices that made it difficult first to attract faculty and students, faculty particularly in the ladder ranks—and this was women and minorities—and then also to retain the best faculty and the best graduate students. And we saw it as being an interrelated problem. That is, if you have a critical mass of faculty, then you’re able to attract better graduate students who’ve got a choice going to the top places in the world, and in the country. If they know that there are some African American faculty who are esteemed in their field and who are working hard and also will function as mentors, then that’s an extra. That often attracts people. Not all people, some people have just the opposite reaction, but for the most part most people felt that and acted upon it.

We also felt that the university in a way, because it frequently asked minority faculty to assume certain tasks—for example, there were demonstrations and so forth, and people say, “We’ve gotta—who do we talk to? I’m trying to understand what these people are saying, but I’m really having some difficulty. I don’t understand where they’re coming from. There’s hostility, I don’t understand why.” All of that kind of stuff is going on. People say, “Well, you know, we aren’t going to be people who are buffers for you the chancellor.” As chancellor, anything that goes on in the university, positive or negative, you get the kudos or you get the blame. And so that’s all part of the job. “But, we understand where a lot of this anger is coming from; we share some of it. So we can explain that to you, but it’s more than explaining. It’s just not about your psychological or our psychological well-being. It’s about creating the kind of positive steps that will make this institution more responsive and address this issue in a positive way.” So we had a series of caucuses with the vice chancellor and after that he concluded that, “It really would be helpful if I had a person who worked with me”—and this would have to be a faculty person, because the university is really an arcane kind of institution. I mean the inner workings of the academic senate and the workings of the personnel issues are really like a medieval guild. I mean, the way there are checks and double checks, and you’re really are valorized not so much on what you do here, but just as importantly or more importantly, on how you stand in your field outside of here.

Institutions rate themselves on how their peers review them. So, if you have a community of scholars, and they never publish anything or people don’t know anything about them, then they’re not going to be held in much high esteem. In an intellectual world, if you are a person who’s active and you are publishing, you are writing your articles, you are in the forefront of the intellectual leadership of that field, or in the case of the arts, in the arts, then it’s important. So that’s the reason why you have people who are outside the institution who value this. Then, because of that, you have to have a mechanism by which fairness is assured and equity is assured. And it’s got to be secret—confidential is the word that’s often used. Confidentiality is
important. Where if you are up for tenure, your chair will ask you, “Who would you like to us to write to who know other scholars who know what you do and who will write about it, and to explain it to any intelligent reader? And who are the people you don’t pick, who, you know, hate you because you had an argument with them at a meeting or whatever? Or just philosophically they disagree with you and these people you think would be predisposed to be unfair.” So you go through all that and then they write to ten or twelve or fifteen people and then they get letters back—not from ten or twelve or fifteen people—seven to ten is probably the norm. And these are extensive letters, critical reviews of what they have done. They review your work, your articles, and in the case of creative work, any of your creative work, whatever you have done. There are people who are knowledgeable about this who do it.

Now, the fact of the matter in any academic field, is people know more and more about less and less. So it gets very esoteric. So there are people in that same department who are all scholars in that field but their specialization is over here, and your specialization is over there. They can understand your fundamental premise but when it comes down to the subtle details of it, they need somebody who has also devoted their life to the same thing you are focusing on. So that peer review process is critical. Now you can see in that situation though, how things can be skewed if—it depends on who you ask; if you ask people who whether consciously or unconsciously you respect, but maybe the scholar’s doing something’s that new and maybe the person is opposed to that. So you hope to have enough people to do that. But it can be really messy, and it can be really subtle and you’ve got to have somebody to really look at it and make sure that fairness and equity has been observed and protected. So all of this is in protection of the importance of peer academic review. Because it would be terrible for an institution if instead of having that kind of careful review by people who were deemed the best scholars in the field, you had some administrator deciding who was going to be appointed and who was not going to be appointed. Now there you’ve got carte blanche to have all kinds of academic freedoms destroyed. And that’s the kind of system that exists in those places in the world where there is no such thing as academic freedom or in some institutions in this country—for example, some community colleges. Community colleges are not academic institutions in the same sense that the university is. State university is somewhere different. People who are teaching at community colleges have no obligation to do research work. Many do and some of the best researchers are in community colleges, but they’re hired there to teach. And then people come and they evaluate them on their teaching, and so forth, and that’s the largest single factor, not the research wing, not pushing the envelope either artistically or intellectually in terms of any other field. So it’s a different set of criteria, and that’s why tenure is such a complicated issue and why it’s coveted in so much.

I say all this as a preface to this business about the African American faculty entering into the situation and sometimes feeling, well—and there have been some cases where people came up from tenure and these appeared to be very
strong people and very productive people, but they didn’t receive tenure. And of course, ultimately, since it’s a secret process, which involves reviews, committees, and then ad hoc committees and then ultimately the whole case comes back—because in those days it was really secret, people didn’t even have the right to necessarily know what everybody had said. It was simply a summary of what was done and someone said, “Well the peer reviews came back and they were lukewarm and not very good.” People felt that this was unfair, that was part of it—that’s in a negative case. In most instances, that didn’t happen all the time, and it’s not the case that every minority who came up for tenure didn’t get tenure. It was just the case that it had been alleged in several significant cases, a couple of relatively famous ones, close ones that you probably remember. I remember Harry Edwards, for example. His case was a very celebrated one. There were several others in other fields. And not only in the case of minorities but parallel or similar situations with women.

Because women, even though they’re half of the population, and the number of women PhDs at the time was still not equal to the number of men. And it did depend upon the fields. In the sciences, there were disproportionate numbers of men. In the humanities there were equal numbers, as you would expect. There were more than equal numbers. But, in the faculty, whether it was the humanities, or the sciences, or the social sciences, there were very small amounts of women. There were classic cases of husband/wife teams: both of them being students together, both of them completing PhDs, both of them completing research programs, and both applying jobs at the same institutions. And the man’s hired and the woman is not. And the woman is sometimes appointed as a lecturer. Because the assumption is that the man’s going to be the bread-winner and the woman’s going to be the nurturer, the caregiver. If they want to have a family, the wife is going to stay home. It’s those kinds of assumptions that people acted upon, especially as the people making decisions were men, generally older and they had certain assumptions about the way it should be. [chuckle]

Now. So after a series of caucuses where we sort of define what were the issues, what were some of the impediments to keeping the number of African American and other minorities from achieving tenure in greater numbers. We assume that everybody doesn’t make tenure anyway, so a certain percentage is not going to make it anyway, whether they’re African American or whatever. So we said we wanted to look at that. But we also saw the cohort of African Americans were smaller in general. It’s really tragic that somebody comes and goes through all of that, is appointed, and six years later—the decision has to be made by the seventh year—no go. I mean they come up and they don’t get tenure. And not only that, sometimes people feel—and I think that this is generally true independent of whether they’re white men or women or whatever—often when that happens people assume that they didn’t know that people had questions about it. It wasn’t systematic; it was just done and then the final reports come in. Then they say, “But, if I had known that you had these concerns about my work, I could have adjusted that. You misunderstand
what my intent is.” So it was a closed process; it wasn’t an open process. It was closed because the idea was to keep confidential in order to protect the integrity of the process. In many of the situations it can err one way or the other, and it was erring too much in favor of confidentiality.

Okay, in the mist of all of these complicated issues, the African American issue arises and we say, “Hey, look, there’s a special problem that people of color have in this institution, because we’re asked to do disproportionate amount of things,” that we talked about a few minutes ago. And yet we know that the real clock is the quality of your work. Yet if you’re spending time tutoring students, or mentoring students, or you’re going around giving speeches or this or that or whatever, all of it is positive work, but you become a public figure and you aren’t focusing on your work. When it comes time for tenure, it probably is going to be very difficult for you to get it. Now, a certain percentage of people, what they do is so good, it doesn’t make a difference. It’s sort of clear that these people have what it takes, and not only that, they’re more than producing what they’re supposed to produce. In that case, it’s no issue. Most people are somewhere in a grey area. So it’s those people that we look at. And when you’re talking about small numbers of people, it’s a disproportionate—it becomes an issue.

This became an issue because at Berkeley, in the whole academic senate, in the whole ladder rank faculty—this is people on the tenure track—I think prior to 1970 or ’69, there were oh, what, a handful, certainly less than ten, five, six, something like that. Then around 1968-69, Third World Strike and so forth, this becomes a catalyst. It became a catalyst not only because students were raising hell, because students in the Third World Movement brought to the fore that there are very few people of color who are faculty here. So, then the faculty, those people who had a sense of fairness and thought that there is something to this—there clearly was an effort on the part of the institution to try to find “qualified” minorities and women. There were different kinds of issues. In the case of women, there were a lot of women there, at least a lot of white women—they were looked at more carefully, you know. That started later on. But initially, people began to look at that. In the case of minorities, “Well, where are they? How do we find them?” and then people say, “Well, look at the graduate schools. Who is in the graduate schools? How many PhDs are there? Where do they come from? What percentage of those are viable for a career at Berkeley?” So you have all of these issues going on, and a great deal of discovery, “Is there really a cohort of people who are eligible, and if so, how do you attract that eligible group?” Unless you subscribe to the notion that African Americans are fundamentally dumb and stupid and therefore will never qualify, which some people do, then you say there’s got to be an opportunity. If we believe that intelligence is distributed basically relatively equally across the {standard?}, if people are given the right opportunities. And certainly skills and knowledge have to do with exposure. If we can deal with that, then we have a better chance of doing this. So these are the large issues.
So where do you start? Well, you start somewhere. And one of the things that Heyman said after these conversations, “Well, it would be helpful if I had somebody working with me and we made them a faculty assistant for something.” I think from time to time that the university had had special issues that they were concerned about so they had had a faculty person who would come and work with the chancellor, the vice chancellor, working on specific tasks. So he said, “That’s a good model to work on.” Because this is something that I need to be sensitized to, I’m sensitized to”—this is from Heyman’s perspective—“but I’ve got all these other things I have to do. It would be great if I could have somebody that I could talk to, somebody that had some responsibilities who could keep us going in the right direction.” So he said, “Well, let’s create a position,” and I don’t know who came up with the position of Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action.

I became the first faculty assistant for affirmative action. Heyman asked me to serve in that position. I think that what happened was that the black caucus met. And a number of people said, “Well, in the first place, in order for a person to assume this position, it should be a person who is tenured.” Because obviously there’s a conflict of interest if you are an assistant professor and you’re working with the chancellor around reaching tenure. [chuckles] So, “Somebody has to be tenured.” That eliminated a lot of people because a lot of the people weren’t tenured at that point. And then we had some other senior professors, people like Stayton Webster in education, in statistics, David Blackwell, you know who was very well esteemed and had been around for years. But Blackwell wasn’t interested in doing any administrative work at that point, and you have to have a certain kind of personality to be interested in doing it, and it also has to be at a certain point in your career, you know. Because of that, I was asked to do it.

Now what our role then was to first try to assess what the problem is. It was made more acute by the fact that the Bakke decision had just been rendered. The EEOC at that point, Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, I think it was—this was in the Johnson administration— their responsibility was to ensure that equal opportunity was being addressed. In the course of that, dealing primarily with the corporate world, they discovered, “What does this really mean?” People say, “Well, I address everybody, I’m not racist, I don’t do this, we don’t have any signs on the door, we don’t have any colored fountains, you know.” But they said, “You don’t have no black folks and no women and nobody working on your project,” the glass ceiling, you know? And they would say, “Well I don’t know, people just don’t come.” “Yes, we try.” Well no, you’ve got to do better than that, “We want you to demonstrate that you have been trying.” It was out of that thrust that the term affirmative action came. That is, that we want you to not just be neutral, to say “If they walk in the door and I like them, fine,” is one thing. It’s another thing to say that, “We think that it’s such an important national priority that you should take an affirmative stance, you should take affirmative action in order to make sure that you have found those groups that you try to bring into your
institution, those groups that historically and legally have been discriminated against.” See that’s the key: historically and legally discriminated against. So if you have a class of citizens who have suffered this discrimination historically, then it’s proper and right for the government and for all the agencies that deal with the government to respond to that in a positive manner. Because you’ve had three hundred years, two hundred years or so before the government [intervened] of systematically discriminating against these people. Then all of a sudden you say, “We don’t do anything.” So that’s the

Wilmot: My understanding is that also in 1973 that there was the HEW audit, and that that also may have contributed to the University feeling like it had to step up its efforts in addition to responding to the students.

Wilson: Absolutely, that’s right. The Civil Rights movement and everything had moved to a certain point; there was the Bakke case which brought to public the institutions of higher education; what are their responsibilities; what is the Supreme Court going to say; there was the Lyndon B. Johnson executive order; and there then was the HEW (Health and Education Welfare) which was one unit at one point, which was saying, “Well, you know we’re going to enforce this by saying that if you don’t show us that you’ve been taking affirmative action, we’re going to withhold your money.” So they threatened, “We’re going to withhold all your grants,” because the government was giving so many grants for so many things. Then they said, “We’re going to start with Berkeley because Berkeley’s big and we’re going to see what Berkeley can do, so we’re going to do an audit of how many people you have like we had done with some of the businesses.” The tactic was to go and interview a company and then to try to determine what they are doing right and what they’re doing wrong, answer the fundamental question “Had they demonstrated that they are trying to take affirmative action and what are the results?” Then we’re going to set some goals and then we’re going to come back. Those words, “goals” and “timetables” were important. I remember spending all my time—.

Now, all of this didn’t come together. Those were terms that were developed at the many meetings, with many, many different people. HEW was working on it. And Berkeley being a test case, people were coming out and talking about that kind of thing. And people, internally, were trying to figure out what—and the University being this medieval guild, on the one hand it’s a medieval guild, on the academic side. On the other hand, on the administrative side, it’s a like a government agency: you’ve got the president; you’ve got the Board of Regents; you’ve got different spheres of influence. You’ve got the academic center concerned about its academic thrust. You’ve got the administration concerned about the money and making sure that you get certain things, and they intertwine; they influence things in different ways.

So, to make a long story short, on one hand the institution had a fear; “Wait a minute, we get millions of dollars from the government. We don’t want
anybody messing with our money, so we’d better try to come up with something.” Part of it was to protect the institution, “To hell with affirmative action, let’s just protect the institution,” in the view of some people. “If we can do that, fine.” And there were people like me saying, “Let’s make the institution responsive.” And then there are all these things that are subliminal, or not necessarily subliminal but they are systematic institutional forms of race discrimination which exist at the institutional level in a thousand different ways that we aren’t aware of. All of this was going on at the same time.

So it was pushed somewhat from the outside by that EEOC and HEW. And all of this was colored by the fact at a particular time that if X, Y, or C was up for tenure and didn’t get it—let’s say it was a women or a minority and they were cases of both of these—then they would say, “I’m discriminated against.” And then the government comes out and looks at the case and tries to figure out. So in the course of this what began to develop is several approaches to how to approach this thing systematically.

So there were two things I was involved as the Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action. One of them was simply trying to get a handle on what does this mean—what should be the institution’s proper response? How does an institution that’s part of a larger aggregate institution like the University of California—? On one hand I was pushing to go as far as we could. On the other hand, I also recognized that Berkeley couldn’t unilaterally do certain things; they had to get approval from the president’s office. And the president’s office really meant the legal counsel for the president, which was as always conservative.

That’s why I think they hire people like that, because their basic role is to protect the university’s back, and so, “if you don’t have to raise any issue, don’t raise it.” You know, “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” As far as they are concerned, it ain’t broke. [laughs] Some of my most difficult issues had to do with dealing with the legal counsel.

Let me explain how it works: since I said, “Look, this is the kind of position that I’m going to do for two years.” I’m not going to do it longer than that, even though I just got tenure and I therefore have a little flexibility. I don’t want to be another tenured professor who never got to be full professor. You know, I have my own agenda that I want to pursue, but this is important to me, really important to me and I’m willing to devote the time and energy to try and do it. In that time, since I’m the first one, I want this position to become an advocacy position, an advocacy position within the Chancellor’s office for affirmative action. I’m going keep putting as much pressure as I can on the vice chancellor and through the vice chancellor’s office. It wasn’t that I had to [????] with him, because he agreed with most of the things that I said. All he needed was some kind of logical rationale, and some political assessment of what would work and what wouldn’t work and so forth. So, we
were on the same side. But, I was always pushing because I saw that as my role, besides I fundamentally believed in it.

So one of the kinds of things that I began to be able to say, “What are the special situations of minority faculty and women faculty?” and that’s the kind of thing I’ve said about three times already, about the disproportionate things you get involved in simply because you’re a minority. Many people do, not everybody, but many people do. So I’m saying, therefore the University has a responsibility to help these people, and what does that mean? That means, we know that the institution is not going to change its rules on tenure, nor should it. I believe it should be a meritocracy to that degree. One can argue what meritocracy really means, but certainly in terms of a given discipline, the decisions about who gets tenure and who doesn’t get tenure really ultimately should be made in most cases in that discipline, both internal and external, and unless there’s a demonstrated case of racism where somebody’s using that caveat, using that cover to affect a racist kind of case when they’re saying that we’re exercising our rights as scholars in that field, but in reality you look at that and say, “This person’s as good as or better than half the people in the department, and you, yourselves, in your insular world are saying, “No, it isn’t so.” Unless you get some flagrant cases like that, fine, the departments should be the arbiter of what it does in order to maintain the integrity of the system. But, within that, you can work. So I said, “What do we do?” You try to create ways in which the university can support young faculty.

A young faculty comes to Berkeley, you’re teaching your courses, you’re spending a lot of time trying to be the best teacher you can be, you’re trying to write articles or write creative work or do whatever you do, and it takes an enormous amount of time and energy. And then because you’re a responsible person, you’re doing things sometimes in the community, sometimes here and there, because you’re a faculty person and a professor at Berkeley and people say, “Oh, that brings a certain amount of respect,” so you feel a certain responsibility out there, maybe going over to a grade school, maybe trying to be a role model, all these things. The University ought to respond to that—the University can create programs which support the scholarly programs of that group of citizens.

The Career Development Program did that—for minorities who have demonstrated that they have been active, it said we will help you by giving you a summer grant so that you don’t have to spend as much time as you ordinarily would trying to get an external grant; the university will provide an external grant. We also will provide a semester leave and a semester grant for you. Now, that’s very consistent with what the university does all the time. Many eminent scholars get an external grant or an internal grant for something they want to do that’s seen to be to the benefit of the field or the institution. Very consistent, “this is a goal that we want, so we foster that goal.” I’m very proud of that. That still exists, and that’s something that I had to argue for.
In order to do that, though—this is a perfect case in point—as far as Heyman, and Bowker was chancellor then, they said that’s a great idea and they supported it. Talked to the academic senate, they supported it. I had to go around and carry my little portfolio and talk to everybody, okay, fine, they supported it. Then they say, “We have to talk to general counsel,” so you call general counsel. We had to send them a memo on paper about what we want to do and how, the rationale, and the laws, and all the stuff was there. Now, at the same time, I wasn’t doing all of this by myself. I came up with that program, I initiated that program, I wrote it up. Everybody said okay, but then I had to talk to the legal staff, because these memos go around—that’s what happens at institutions—people look at them and review them, and finally the legal counsel says “I’m not sure.” And the argument was the argument that you hear now: “Is this reverse discrimination?”

Wilmot: Right.

Wilson: This was an older white man who was thinking “Well, wait a minute, if you do this, are you going to make this for everybody?” I said, “Well, we’re making this for everybody who can fit this criteria.” That is, if they can demonstrate that they have a disproportionate amount of mentoring, community service, “We’re really focusing on that.” I said, “Really, there’s a targeted group. A targeted group is what the government talks about as those groups that have historically been discriminated against. That’s our target group! [pounds table with hand to emphasize] But we’re not excluding anybody; if you can find me a white male who also meets this and meets this better than any women or minorities, then fine. But frankly, we are targeting this group!” So that was the thing. I thought that was clearly justified. He didn’t, you know. So it went around and around and it took a couple of months to get this resolved.

Wilmot: Was this Michael Smith?

Wilson: No, not Michael Smith. I can’t even remember the name. No, Michael is okay. It was somebody, a legal curmudgeon or something, who was down there years ago. I’m sure he’s long since gone.

But, at any rate, the Berkeley administration supported our idea, and ultimately the president’s office, I guess for political reasons—who knows? They ultimately said go ahead. So then we created the first program. It was the career development grant, and that was the beginning of the university taking some intervention. So that then led to a number of other programs. We had the career development grant; later on, at the graduate level—after I left, after I was there for two years and we had to then set—but that’s only one part of it. Let me tell you about this and then I’ll come back to it.

The other part, later on, after I left two years, we had another person come in. The second person who came in was Bill Shack. Bill Shack ultimately became
dean of the graduate school. He was older than I was, and was a professor in anthropology, although he came to Berkeley the same time I did. He came in and one of the things that Shack created was the Professional Development Program, and that was for graduate students. Again the same rationale. It was an attempt to build a cohort to increase the pool of eligible minorities and women. Students from all over the country would apply for a grant, come to Berkeley for two years to do a post-doc, you’d work on that, and the idea was that you publish what you’ve done, your dissertation. The biggest thing, once you’ve done your dissertation, is translating that into a book. Because acceptance of the book is really then what moves you as a serious candidate.

So this was assisting them. And often how it used to happen in the good old days, in terms of faculty recruitment as well as graduate students, it literally was the old boy network. When somebody picks up the phone and says, “Hey, who you got this year? Who do you have this year?” “Well, I have three great guys this year.” “Okay, well send ‘em out,” you know, “let’s talk to them.” And that’s the way it was. It wasn’t systematic. And so Shack got the Professional Development Program, and then there were a couple of other programs that developed, but they were all based on that same rationale that I had argued earlier successfully.

We will talk about some of the other things about the Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action, because there were two aspects: one of them was the innovative side—creating things, creating positive interventions to try to address this problem. They were drops in the bucket, but really important in the long run. So that was the first thing. And then ultimately, this program, the Career Development Program became a model, not only at Berkeley, but all over the system. And now it’s all over the country. Most people don’t really even know where it came from, it has different names, but that was it. If I hadn’t come up with it somebody else would’ve because it was such a logical kind of situation. But historically that is something that I feel very proud about.

Now another aspect of affirmative action had to do with addressing, in a systematic way, institutional racism, and that had to do with the whole process of affirmative action. Now governments being governments, really as it came out said, “How did you do this? How many times? You invited people out, how did you decide who those people were? How did you advertise? Did you advertise?” There was no formal advertisement. Occasionally somebody would put something in a journal, but it wasn’t systematic. So the government began to push. “Well, let’s see, in business, they advertise. We ask them to advertise.” So that’s when the university began to say okay, let’s advertise. So, I was there when they instituted this whole bureaucracy of advertising for faculty positions. Because staff positions were advertised, but faculty positions weren’t advertised. There might be a journal somewhere, but not in a systematic way. So it was systematic now.
In order to do this we had a whole series of things. We had to develop plans so this became the systematic form of affirmative action. That meant that for every search you had to advertise publicly. In order to advertise publicly you had to submit your advertisement. Because submissions could be so constrained that only two people in the world can do them, so they had to have somebody in the world look at that to see that. All of that had to come by my office, so technically, I had to review those. In addition to that there was the question of once the case was done, you had to write up the case—the government was pushing for this. I believed in it, but I knew that after a while people would figure out how to do it and they could still go on and try to have the search, go through all of the motions, but really not do it, not really necessarily fundamentally change what was going on. But you still had to do that because it simply made it open for everybody.

And so we had an open search; it was a systematic search; there was a summary, a structure of the way the report had to be written, that is, because some reports would focus on one thing and other reports would focus on another thing—it’s hard to compare apples and oranges—so you should explain in your summary why this person was the best person ultimately. You should explain when there were women and minorities in the pool, that is, why they weren’t selected? You should explain what special efforts you took to find women and minorities. This ran the gamut from calling people that you knew who were minorities or institutions where you knew women and minorities, or conversations with people about whether there were women or minorities. It’s making a systematic effort. At first, people saw it as a nuisance, but then people began to realize that wait a minute, you did get a couple of good people. They may not have gotten the job, but they were viable candidates and so forth. So that was the systemization of the search process, that was another important thing this position had to do.

And then, after the systemization of the process, there was a question of the review of all of the cases. That is, it occurred to me fairly early on, I think the second year or so after once we began to get a little more systematic, that there were some cases going through. First, when I was reviewing things, I was asked to review the cases of women and minorities. This is sort of the “protecting the institution” idea, so who ever thought of this initially probably thought we ought to make sure that we have a person who is an advocate, who looks at this and in their independent eyes, thinks that these people are treated fairly and are treated fairly. But it occurred to me that it doesn’t make sense to only look at those, because all I see is what they said in this case. I want to see the cases of those successful people; I don’t just want to see the cases of those people that happen to be women and minorities—some of them were successful and some of them weren’t. But I want to be able to have the right to review any of the cases.

It seemed to me to be cardinal for me to be able to—if my role was to look at these cases and advise the chancellor. Because ultimately while the academic
senate recommends what the department proposes, the chancellor ultimately decides. The chancellor can overrule, technically. But he can’t do it often. If he does it often, then of course the academic senate loses confidence in the chancellor and then the chancellor doesn’t have his academic senate behind him in support.

So that’s one of the things I did. I could pull any case on anybody whether they were a woman or a minority or whoever. I could see the cases of those people who people had thought were the greatest thing since sex, to those people who people thought were really mediocre. The result of that was that I learned a hell of a lot about the university I never would have known. [laughs] Just think, having the flexibility of reading any personnel case, from the Nobel scientist who is getting a promotion to the highest, highest, highest, to a struggling assistant professor who is coming in whose first thing doesn’t have a snowball’s chance in hell of making it. Because of clear reasons, you know. It gave you an insight into how the university works, many instances, as you can imagine, in a university like this, are very clear and the criteria were clear and decisions were deservedly made. There were others that were very gray and very troubling. I mean it could have gone either way, depending on how much you weigh one set of criteria against the other. So it gave me a great deal of insight into it. The other thing that happened was—

Wilmot: I don’t want to leave the subject of the insight that you got, because I feel like that’s untapped. So I want to ask you about that. What did you learn about the university as a result of having that kind of access into previously confidential hiring and promotional practices?

Wilson: Right. They’re still confidential, they’re still confidential. It’s just that I had access to them. I mean, deans have access to them; the budget committee has access to them; selected people with certain responsibilities have access to them. After affirmative action—and this is as a result of court actions and the whole thing, not only me—there’s just the whole range of what they governments and the courts were saying about this, because there were many suits about this. What they finally said is that you can have a redacted, you can have a redacted case. Each candidate has a right to know not necessarily who’s writing it about them, but they have a right to see all the letters that refer to their research. They get a redacted copy of it. There’s a copy where all the other names and places are taken out, so they get all these blanks, but they can read it and they see the substance of what happened.

What I saw, in answer to your question, is that the university culture has to adapt to the reality of another goal, there are major external goals. On one hand, there’s the importance of confidentiality; on the other hand, the importance of affirmative action. And how does the university accommodate that? The university works out some kind of compromise that protects confidentiality and at the same time allows people to know what the substance was. In in the absence of not even having a redacted [version], you don’t
know, and people may have smiled in your face and told you you were the
greatest thing, and then written you letter saying you’re terrible. So then
you’ve got the letter, you say “Okay, well, yeah, this one’s pretty bad. I
wonder who that idiot was. They really blasted me on this one. This one’s
terrible, but these over here are great.” So you get to see that. Often, in
controversial cases you’ll get people who are strongly partisans in a positive
sense, and strongly opposed to appointment to tenure or promotion to full
professor or whatever, or even appointment, on another level. You get to see
and you know what they’re saying. And then anybody who’s an honest
scholar is going to start to question, “well, maybe I should have done a little
bit more on this, and maybe I should have done a little bit more.” Unless you
just think it’s wrong. It’s usually a combination of both that you have.

So one of the things that I found out is that the institution can be responsive if
there are strong arguments made on both sides. The other thing I found out is
that the institution is extremely complex and that the complexity is a reflection
of the real subtleties and refinement that is demanded in an enterprise like this.
Though there is racism—and there clearly was some racism and so forth, at
least in my opinion; there was some sexism in my opinion—many instances
just weren’t that flagrant racism. It was much more subtle and much more
complex than that, so you have to deal with that.

Now, in those many instances once this is all part of it, it automatically begins
to open it up a little bit because everybody knows everything they write is
going to be read by this person now. [laughs] You can’t hide behind, “This
person is no good.” You’ve got to say why this person is no good, or why this
person is good. And that tempers expression, and it puts the burden of proof
on people who are advocates or the detractors to be clear about why this is
occurring. So that is an important step. The other thing that I think is
important, is that it also says—I mean for most cases it’s pretty clear one way
or another. But there are those cases that are still the troubling ones that could
have gone either way. When it gets to that case, that’s when I think some of
the most important kind of things that happens. That is, if you’re an advocate,
then you go to the chancellor, and you say, “Look, I’m not going to sign this. I
can’t sign this in good conscience. Because even though they say this, there
are these counter arguments here. You’re the vice chancellor, you can talk to
the chancellor about it.” I’ll talk to the chancellor about it too. “I think this is
shaky stuff. I think it’s B.S., and the reason I think its B.S. is X, Y, and Z and
even though this argument is here, look at this argument there.” I would be
very—you know, I could do that. Sometimes the chancellor would say,
“Yeah, you’re right, I agree.” Sometimes the chancellor would think about it
and then support it anyway. And there were enough times when I was listened
to that I felt it was worth doing. If I was never listened to, then I would say
that this is B.S., too, wasting my time. But there were enough times when
things were done.
Wilmot: What were the considerations that informed whether or not you were listened to by Al Bowker?

Wilson: I think it had to do with his personal reading of it, whether he agreed with me or didn’t agree with me. Because it’s a gray case, we all admit it’s a gray case. Also what Heyman had to say, too. If it was me and Heyman, I think Bowker would tend to go with it. If it were me and Heyman didn’t agree with it, then Bowker would tend to do what Heyman would do because he’s appointed Heyman as vice chancellor. So, all of that. But it gets gray because there were certain things that I felt very strongly about, and usually when that was the case Heyman would support it anyway. There were some of those where we both went out on a limb. And one of the most famous cases and this is—I don’t want to talk about individual cases—but there are some famous cases where the chancellor turned down something that a department had said. You need to just go back and look at the record. So that’s really tough when you are turning down what a department had said. Usually those were those tough very gray cases where it could have gone either way and somebody took a position. But, now, in ninety percent of the cases that was not the case.

The other thing had to do with the understanding that this is the kind of thing that had to go on, that the institution could be made to be responsive, but you’ve got to have a sensitive vice chancellor first, and the Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action must really be a strong advocate. After I left, there have been a series of Faculty Assistants for Affirmative Action. After the state laws banning the usage of affirmative action, they called it equity, equity something. What’s her name? There’s a woman now. Then after this position was successful, since the workload was heavy, they created another position called the faculty assistant for—what was it called?—essentially it had to do with women’s issues, but the person did the same kind of thing that I did. Then they were talking about at one point conflating the two positions. I said no, because you had different issues. So they didn’t do that, but ultimately they now have Angela Stacy, I guess, is now the faculty associate for equity or something like that. So in a way they have conflated the two positions into one position, but I think that she’s full-time.

Wilmot: Let’s take a break for a minute. I have a lot of questions.  

[interview interruption; new disk]

Wilmot: I want to back up and ask you some questions. You had mentioned initially this caucus of black faculty. Who was involved with that and how did it convene? How did it come together?

Wilson: The caucus of black faculty was simply convened as a result of people knowing one another and saying, “Look, we ought to have lunch together sometime. We think we have some mutual interests.” It was that simple. People who were interested came. There were certain people who were more
interested than others, and people then became activists. People like Troy Duster, Russ Ellis, Harry Morrison, William Lester, myself, and Margaret Wilkerson, Barbara Christian and so forth. These were people who were all there in the seventies. And there were others, [Ray] O’Neil Collins and so forth. There was a range of people but those are some of the people that most immediately come to mind. They were there.

We started discussing these issues and we also agreed that there should be some institutional kind of response. It was an ad hoc kind of grouping of people. We decided it should be faculty rather than faculty and administrators at one point. Primarily because we recognized that the issues of faculty, especially ladder-rank faculty were different than the issues of non-ladder-ranked faculty and the issues of administrators. The faculty structure in an institution like Berkeley is a much more horizontal kind structure. That is, one doesn’t think of the chair of their department as necessarily their boss, or the dean or the vice chancellor as their boss. When you are a faculty member, you do your thing, you have certain responsibilities both in terms of research and teaching to fulfill, and you attempt to fulfill them. But you aren’t reporting to a person who is reviewing your job performance in that same way. No single person reviews your job performance. The model in administrators is a much more vertical structure, where people serve at the behest of the person who is often the person who appointed them, especially at the upper levels of the administration. The chancellor decides who his cabinet is going to be, who the vice chancellor is going to be, they have a portfolio and they work and they serve at the pleasure of the chancellor. If the chancellor felt that the person wasn’t doing an adequate job, the chancellor can say, “Thank you but I really don’t need you.” In those instances, if it’s a person who has an academic rank, then they go back to academia. If it’s a person who was simply—I don’t mean simply—but a person who was an appointment as a business position, then he goes and looks for another job or something. So it’s a different kind of world. We felt that it should be faculty because we wanted to deal with the very issues of faculty, as we see them. And so that was the reason it started.

Because most of us either the same generation or close to it—although when you think about it there was quite a range of ages there—people got to know each other, became friendly, became personal friends, and it was also kind of a group of convening of friends and buddies.

Then, when I became the first Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action, I had access to all the records. So I began to be the convener of the meetings. So I’d simply call a meeting and arrange a time that people could meet. Usually it was Friday afternoon, Friday lunch once every month, or once every two months or something. We’d all come together and bring each other up to date on what had been going on in the areas of mutual interest. We’d also become aware of what new faculty was coming, and we’d try to reach out to the new faculty and welcome them to the community. And we also supported one another to the degree that we can. Remember, the disciplines were all over the
place. All the way from somebody like Bill Lester in chemistry to someone like Margaret Wilkerson in theater.

Also, I think it was a generational thing. Most of us came to the university in the early seventies, and what has happened over the years is that most of us have retired or separated from the university in the late nineties. That’s a thirty-year span. And so most of the people have either separated, passed on, or moved away. The thing I regret about that is that it was a close unit at one point, and we’re still close to the people, you know who still know each other. But somewhere along the line, we didn’t maintain this kind of closeness well enough to extend to some of the younger faculty. Some of the younger faculty did but other younger faculty didn’t and didn’t continue to have that same kind of comradeship that we’d had before.

But of course there also were different dimensions to it. Part of it had to do with the fact that at that time we all were relatively young; we all felt acutely what needed to be done. By the time some of these things were in place, there was less of a necessity to do that. There still was an importance, I think, vital importance of having a relationship with faculty of color who came to the university but it didn’t seem to be as pressing. From time to time I would have a party and invite people over, everybody I knew. Because the faculty position, Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action had a list of everybody who was minority so you could simply look up the list and even if you didn’t know them, you could call them up and invite them to the meeting. Some people just weren’t interested. Some of the people, especially some of the young, recent faculty really would rather not be referred to as African American or Black, anything like that. They’ve lost somehow the urgency. Well, I can only assume that for them it’s not important. Now when I say “for them,” I’m not talking about many people, I’m talking about maybe one or two people. Most of the people here are elated to have older faculty who have more experience in academia and who are willing to assist them in every way they can. There are some other people, just a couple of other people, who take umbrage with that. But in a post-Clarence Thomas world, that’s what you have to expect.

Wilmot: You mentioned there was a series of meetings of the caucus of the black faculty and the position, Faculty Assistant of Affirmative Action to the Vice Chancellor—that position was an outcome of these meetings. Were there other outcomes from these meetings with the chancellor and the vice chancellor?

Wilson: I think it depended on some of the issues. Several times, from time to time, the black faculty met with either the chancellor or the vice chancellor. The first meetings were these and this position resulted from that. The title, I don’t know exactly where the title came from, but anyway that’s where it came from. But, there were other issues, for example, later on at various times people were concerned about the number of minority or African American graduate students and initiatives that people proposed—the postdoctoral
program that perhaps may have grown out of some of those discussions. But these were discussions at different times over a period of time.

Everybody who was part of that caucus was constantly on the lookout for outstanding faculty who we thought might be interested in coming to Berkeley and worked with the Faculty Assistant for Affirmative action to make sure that some of these people were seriously considered. There were times when there were positions of administrative importance that the chancellor or the vice-chancellor would call people or perhaps meet with groups of people, sometimes with a large group to say, “Look, you know, I’m really interested in making sure that we have some minority people who are viable candidates for this position or that position. Do you have any suggestions, knowing what you know about the nature of this position?” Once in a while there were people who were appointed to such positions, the result of this consultation. So, it was over a wide range of issues and concerns.

Wilmot: Is there anybody who’s name you can name, people who came to the university either as faculty or in a high level administrative position that you remember during this time advocating for?

Wilson: Let’s put it this way, I’d rather not put it that way because I don’t want to give the onus that maybe they came here because people said it because it never worked that way. Everybody who came here was clearly qualified. But there are several people who came to the university as top-level administrators or sometimes faculty members, you know, who were brought to the attention of the—not so much the departments because the departments usually knew about that—but were certainly supported strongly by people who were members of the faculty. As a matter of fact, most of the people who came in a capacity like that were people who somebody in the caucus knew about, though their name might not have originated with the caucus initially but people who were in the caucus or the ad hoc who had contacts with them and strongly supported them. So it was that kind of thing.

It was a loose knit kind of thing. I sometimes hesitate to use the word “caucus,” because caucus often has the connotation of a pressure group. We were an advocacy group, clearly no question about that. But we are not a caucus in the sense that—it was more of a council of concerned people who believed very deeply in this issue and had developed the confidence of the then vice chancellor and chancellor.

Wilmot: Somehow, it sounds like a formal entity that was recognized by the vice chancellor.

Wilson: Well, it wasn’t formal in the sense that there was an official office, we were elected, there were a group of people and we represented all the people, no. It was an ad hoc group of people who were deeply concerned, who were
advocates, who made sure that what they had to say, made sure that the chancellor, leadership heard what they had to say.

Wilmot: You mentioned departments’ awareness of potential hires. During your time in that post which departments registered as truly concerned about bringing faculty of color on board and which ones didn’t?

Wilson: Well, it’s hard to say. On one hand it’s easy: all you need to look at—I mean, there are certain departments that historically had fifty, sixty people and never ever had any African Americans appointed. Some of them may have one or two now, but it’s just a fact; certain departments just didn’t have it. I remember political science, for example, didn’t have any African Americans in it. I don’t think they have any African Americans now. They might. So that’s why I hesitate to say because I don’t even know at this point.

Wilmot: Just in terms of your two years? [as Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action]

Wilson: Of the years that I was here? Most of them! [chuckling] It was very few. I mean most departments had maybe one at the most, and maybe two. Sociology, I think, was the department that had two. Both Troy Duster and Harry Edwards were in sociology. But most of the other departments, I can’t think of any other departments outside of African American Studies where there was more than one African American. But that’s true of every institution that I know about, at that time. Now, having said what I said about political science or—I think history may have had at least one African American at one point, but whoever that was I don’t think stayed very long. But the point was that within each of those departments, there were some very, very strong advocates for affirmative action, very, very strong advocates for diversity. It’s just that ultimately when it got down to the nitty gritty and the final decision was made, it often ended up that it was not a person of color nor a female. You can attribute that to a number of different things, and it’s hard to say what actually determined that in each of those two cases. I don’t want to paint the picture that there was a department and a whole discipline where nobody in that department cared about much about these issues, that’s not true. And yet, you would expect that in certain areas you would have more. English, you know, eventually there were some people in English, but not initially, no.

Although it’s complicated because I think when Barbara Christian, when she first came, came in English. I think she may have decided that she wanted to come to African American Studies. I think was she was originally appointed—she may have even had a joint appointment or something—but when it gets like that. I’m on shaky ground because I can’t remember the facts.

Wilmot: For me that question comes from over the course of working on this project, learning about the way that this institution operates and learning that each of the departments is very independent, and weighs in hugely on their own hiring
process. So that kind of made me start to think about “Okay, so which departments were really kind of getting behind the ball and were really committed and which departments were just in a business-as-usual mode and never really responded to changing social realities?”

Wilson: You know, the fact of the matter is that the incidents of departments—and remember we’re talking about a faculty that at that time was 1,800, I forget what the total number of faculty, 1,800 or something like that. And the current number of African American faculty now, ladder rank faculty is—do you know those statistics? Forty something, forty-five? The last figure I remember was around forty-five. I think the highest numbers were around forty-five. I suspect that it might be a little bit lower than that now, but I’m not absolutely certain. But when you look at the hard numbers, you talk about the perspective of the seventies—well before the seventies—six or seven and then the early seventies up to fifteen. But then there was an explosion from the seventies up through about the middle eighties, where we passed the twenties and got into the thirties.

So that was that rate of growth, which wasn’t really earthshaking, but given from where we were coming, it was great. We then projected, if we could continue to project that, then by now we should have fifty, sixty, something like that. We don’t. A lot of that I think clearly has to do with the anti-affirmative action mood, the impacts of people like Ward Connerly and the Board. Because I think some faculty both philosophically and in terms of their own personal views really believed in a diverse society and wanted to push that and were convinced that we should try to do that. I think after the passing of those anti-affirmative action laws, I think they felt that we can’t do that. In spite of the fact that the university is still governed partially by a federal regulations. The university has an obligation to develop a diverse faculty. But how do you interpret that, how constraining do you take the affirmative action—SP 1 and 2 are the laws that really did that. Well first the board of regents— rescinded that ultimately, but then the state law, which is still on the books.

I think that has the effect of really dampening the enthusiasm. And of course you saw in the first few years of that state law that the number of applicants to graduate schools really dropped significantly. That’s since been redressed but it was really amazing in the law school for, example, when in one year, there was only one new African American student.

Wilmot: —who was admitted and he didn’t come that year so there were zero that year. There’s this amazing book that I just read that’s called Silence at Boalt Hall.

Wilson: Who wrote it?
Wilmot: Andrea Guerrero. It’s really a very powerful book. She is just so well grounded in terms of where she gets her data and also she uses first person narrative in addition to really concrete data.

Wilson: Was she a faculty member or a student?

Wilmot: Student. In the time that you held the position of faculty assistant to the vice chancellor, were there advocates that you remember, that you can speak about by name?

Wilson: Oh sure, there were. Well first the faculty senate had a faculty committee, a Committee on the Status of Women and Ethnic Minorities. And that committee—I can’t remember all the people on it but there were a number of people who were on that committee and always were advocates for that. We can go back and look at that to see who some of those people were. Now some of those people were people in the black caucus anyway. But there were other people who were often women, white women, who felt very strongly about this, and participated. And then there were other people, not white women, who were white men who felt very strongly about this. I hate to name people and I’ll think about it later on, but there were people—

Wilmot: Maybe there were too many people to name.

Wilson: That’s right, there are so many people and I wouldn’t want to leave anybody’s name out.

Wilmot: One of the things that you mentioned to me that was interesting was who supported you. And this is a two-part question. The first part is what did your support look like while you were in this position of Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action.

Wilson: Okay, well, first we had the black caucus group, because that’s how the position was sort of developed. Then we had Heyman because Heyman was the one who said, “Look, I’d like to have somebody work with me” and then ultimately he asked me to come work with him. I knew it was a position that had potential to learn a lot about the university and the personnel process, but I also knew that the position had the potential for being a very messy position because of the political kinds of things. Once I understood how complicated—well I knew it was going complicated anyway because I had been around the university all my life—but really getting the inner details and reading cases, I understood how it really became complicated. Then having Heyman as support at the same time as the black faculty and then my belief that this was extremely important and we had to do it. And it was a time in the institutional history that something like this had to happen. Those things were sustaining me.
Also I think the general milieu at the time. Seventies, not that long away from the sixties. And seeing palpable change or believing that palpable change could be had. My formative years as an academic really were in the early sixties. So coming to adulthood, I guess you could say, or certainly coming to a sense of oneself as an academic also coincided with coming to a sense of oneself as having confronted the issues of race and racism and making some decisions about how you’re going to respond to that and what the mandates are for you as an individual in this position.

It was very clear to me from my first position at Oberlin that I was in a very, very fortunate way. Here I was, in my twenties, teaching at this institution and there was this big swirl of these issues going around which I thought were very, very important, too, and I wanted to be able to make an impact. I wanted to use my position both in support of the students who were really dealing with the—who were a generation younger than me.

But I was married, I had young kids, and we were a family in that town. We could relate to the kids both in terms of style, age. I liked to party and have a good time; my wife does to; and we were a young family with young kids. We used babysitters and girls would come over and babysit. They would love it because they would get away from the dorm and play with our kids. And we’d love it because it we could go out and do things. So it was a, it was a really a good time and good place for the kids to be nurtured in a nice little community that also is a microcosm of a larger society.

Wilmot: You started talking about this in terms of how you started to understand your role as an academic and coming of age as an academic and what your contributions was going to be. That’s how you started to talk about your time at Oberlin.

Wilson: That’s right, that’s right. You couldn’t separate yourself. When I originally started academia I thought of myself as being a composer—well, I didn’t know what I was going to do. I was going to be a musician because I was a musician all my life and that was the right thing to do. In the course of my undergraduate study it was, I decided I wanted to be a composer. There was this big break between my world before and my world after, because when I went to Washington University in 1954—I think we probably talked about this, it was something I referred to as the Jackie Robinson Syndrome. You’ve got to show that you can do it and so forth. So there were two worlds, like the W.E.B. Du Bois notion, double consciousness. There was a Black world and a White world. For whatever reason, because of my academic—I was essentially functioning in a predominantly white world. That was very clear because there was just maybe one or two other blacks around anywhere in sight. So you have to learn the rules of the world very well in order to deal with it. But that was nothing new for black folks because we did it all the time. [laughs]
So that wasn’t different, the difference was when the social issues of the sixties hit and you had to make choices: where are you? What do you want to do? Do you have a responsibility? Is your responsibility different from another person who’s not situated the same way you are? I felt, well, no, I do have a responsibility because I have been fortunate to be here and fortunate in the sense that I understand how this institution works and I understand the importance of scholarship and the importance of ideas in a fundamental way and I see a real void there. I see a real void there and I can fill this lacuna because I have the skills to be able to deal with it. So that was when I made that kind of commitment.

At the same time the social commitment, I was there, participated in CORE, participated in everything from the early tests when you sent a white couple in and then you sent a black couple in, all of that stuff, you know. I didn’t participate in the freedom rides; I didn’t participate in the bus counter sit-ins, at least not in the bus counter sit-ins where people got beat up, I didn’t do that, you know. But I participated in some of the stuff that preceded that, you know, where we’d go in a place and we’d try to determine the degree to which the desegregation is being implemented. All of that was very pivotal, because I’m eighteen, nineteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, and I’m making decisions about what I want to do and how I want to do it. That’s why taking this position in Florida was so pivotal—and we talked about that train ride and all that. I’ll always remember that.

**Wilmot:** Did you ever read a book by George Napper, I think it’s called *Blacker than Thou*?

**Wilson:** Yeah, I think I, I think I—

**Wilmot:** It’s an interesting book. I only found the dissertation copy of it. It’s a book that’s about what that meant when there was a suddenly shifting social agenda and priority for college-going black people. And how people’s identity was called into—in any event we can talk about that later.

**Wilson:** That is a very interesting thing. And as matter of fact, I experienced that more at Oberlin looking at the students. Because Oberlin’s student population, predominantly Black student population, was made up of two kinds of people: the talented tenth, you know, who were always there, from gifted families and this was the traditional place that they would go. And then there was this new cohort of people that everybody was looking for to find that really talented kid in the middle of the ghetto, who is really bright but who’s angry and wants to find his own way, and insists on carrying with him or her whatever vestiges of his view of whatever that culture is. As opposed to the middle class person who by virtue of being middle class has a certain amount of assimilation.

Now, I saw the angst that this caused in a lot of the students. Because a lot of the students were very upset and had a great deal of difficulty adjusting to one
another and adjusting to the new mandates. And sometimes developed all kinds of strategies, some of them negative in terms of acting out their sense of frustration about who they were and pretending that they were something that they really were not. There were some kids who clearly were upper middle class black families, 2nd, 3rd generation college at places like Oberlin and Harvard and Princeton and so forth, that talented group who chose or decided to try to take on the mantle of being that talented, but disadvantaged kid from the ghetto. Often you would see that, maintaining the biggest Afro in the world, and the kind of discourse that they thought was associated with the ghetto. So you had some really kind of strange things going on there. And yet there were other people who were strivers. Hey, they just wanted to get their degree, they’re from workaday families, they live there, they want to work and they want to do what they want to do, and they want to go to med school, or law school, or business school or whatever. And they love Oberlin, and they’re black, and they realize they’re black but they’re not going to do anything crazy.

And there were some other people who were on the border of doing something crazy and used this. Some were having some deep problems; some of them never got—. I talk about the casualties of the sixties. And some of the people were like that. They never really got out of that; they never really were able to reconcile who they were deep inside and what they thought they should be. Who knows, people may have had other problems anyway. Very interesting, you did see that manifestation of that, very vivid in those days. You see it some now. In any society you see it some. But not as much as you did when people were fundamentally giving a sense of themselves which was not true. And then their mothers and fathers would come to graduation and you would say, “This one with this one.” [chuckling while matching up the parents and children] But that was because they really didn’t want anyone to know who were they really were.

Most people realize that the African American experience is diverse. It always has and it always will be, and there’s never been a monolithic “Everybody knows the same thing, thinks the same way, does it, has the same values.” We share—many of us—share some of the same racism and you have to confront that, but how you confront that is as variable as there are people. But anger and concern and resentment, yeah, that’s part of it, that’s part of it. But how that is reflected is a different matter.

But we’ll have to talk about this some more another day.

Wilmot: Let’s close for today.

[End of Interview 7]
Interview 8: May 8, 2003

Wilmot: Interview eight, May 8th 2003. Olly Wilson and Nadine Wilmot. So Olly, today I wanted to ask you about the performance that you just put together with Mary Lovelace O’Neal, Call and Response. One of the things that I noticed is the way that you really worked with at least two different musical traditions. I wondered if you could talk a little bit about that.

Wilson: Sure. I think all of my music reflects my experiences musically. I think that my musical persona is based on a range of musical experiences, drawing from different traditions. Obviously from the African American tradition and also the European tradition. And also the American reinterpretation of the European tradition, and the American reinterpretation of the African American tradition. So, all of that is part of all of my musical experiences. In some pieces, the fact of that sort of disparate kinds of musical background becomes highlighted greater or lesser to certain degrees. I think it’s in all of my music in one way or another on a basic conceptual level. But it’s also on a surface level in certain pieces, and I think this is one of those pieces. Because even the title itself is based on a traditional formal trope or structure that it is used very fundamentally in African American music and African music. But it’s used on a number of different architectonic levels and so forth. So we chose to call the piece Call and Response because while it referred to the structural kind of practice that my music uses, it also refers to the whole nature of the relationship, the collaborative relationship, where I’m inspired by the work of Mary Lovelace O’Neal, and I write some music in response to that, and then she in turn was inspired by the music and makes a painting in response to that. So the call and response kind of thing. Now that’s something that could go on ad infinitum. In my case, I was looking at four specific paintings of hers, but I also was looking at my understanding her work over a longer period of time. So it’s not only those four paintings, my understanding of Mary Lovelace O’Neil as an artist. I brought all that to bear in producing the works.

What I tried to do was not create something that would accompany the paintings, but rather to create something that was inspired by what I took to be the essence of the idea behind the painting, so that I had a broader range. But I’m also looking at that painting, and to the degree that I was successful, at least on one level, the work should exist by itself, independently. Then on another level, hopefully, people see the painting and hear the music and pick up some kind of relationship between the two. Now for some people, it’s a one-to-one relationship. That’s not what I intended. What I intended was to capture the spirit and what I considered to be the essence of each of those works. So that was what I did.

In her case, what she did the same thing. She knows my music, has known it over a twenty-year span as well, was then able to take all of that into
consideration, plus what I had played for her of this piece. We actually had one session in which we recorded the first movement and so she actually heard part of that. But that was just a recording of the first movement—she was still in Chile, so she didn’t hear it until later—but still, there was enough of that that she had seen that she was able to start the work. And her work was based on her reinterpretation of what I had done, not only in the four movements I did, but in the other work I had done, too. So we both had maximum freedom at the same time that the idea was to come out with something that complimented one another, that reflected that.

Wilmot: One of the things she talked about in the talk that you both gave prior to the performance and the viewing, was the idea of having to learn a new language. She was talking about having to learn an aural language, a musical language and how it was scary for her. For you, what was this like? Was this learning a new language? Did you have to translate from one language to another?

Wilson: You know, I didn’t view it that way. Because for me, I knew her painting frankly better than she knew my music. Because I’ve gone to more of her exhibitions—she’s come to my concerts, too—but I’ve gone to more of her exhibitions and seen more of her stuff, so it’s a little bit different. The difference is that music exists in time and not space, and painting exists in space. So that once you’ve done the painting, if you have a print of that, you can go and see that print, you can go in a gallery and walk around and see a progression of an artist’s work as you go from print to print.

In music, nobody can do that. There’s not enough time. Because each piece is as short as five, as long as forty minutes. I think listening habits are different. You have to will yourself to listen to a piece for twenty minutes, and to listen to three or four pieces by one composer; it’s a major event. That’s why, if you go to a concert, let’s say an orchestral concert, you hear maybe three or four pieces, period. You go to a gallery, you see twenty, thirty pieces. And artists work in such a way that they’ll do a study of this and they’ll do five or six paintings that are based on that same idea. Composers, sometimes their preliminary studies don’t become pieces. Sometimes they just stay preliminary studies and sometimes there are pieces that show a trend.

Now if you’re a composer you do it all the time because it’s part of learning the craft. You listen to the works of other composers, especially those who you think are doing something important, you listen to that, you study that and so forth. But it’s different and unusual for people to pursue that to the same degree, it’s just a different kind of experience. It wasn’t so much a new language as it was looking at a medium and looking at it a different way. If you have a work of art, let’s say, or choreography or literature, and you’re reading it just as another person reading a book or seeing a painting, you think of it in another way. If you think about this being the source of inspiration for you then you think about it a different way. So you come back to it more, you look at it different ways, you think about all your experiences of looking at
paintings and seeing how all of that comes to bear, and then how this is going to be reflected in the music that you create. So it’s a slightly different process.

Wilmot: There was one painting and one piece: the painting was of the spats and the piece then made explicit reference, I think, to jazz traditions, though I’m not sure. Can you tell me?

Wilson: The painting is called *Dark Days in the Abundant Blue Light of Paris*. It’s one of those beautiful poetic names that she uses with her work, *Dark Days in the Abundant Blue Light of Paris*. I’ve got the painting, do you want to see it again?

Wilmot: I would like to look at it another time.

Wilson: Okay. But basically when you see the painting, it’s a very dark painting. It’s hard to know where the edges are. It blurrs, it’s hard to know what is being represented and where it begins and where it ends. The other thing about it is that in terms of May’s work, it is one of the more representational kinds of works, where there are objects there that you can say, “That’s this. That’s that.”

Wilmot: A corset or shoes. [chuckles]

Wilson: But it’s confusing though, or ambivalent, or ironic because of the fact that the center object that you see looks like its corsets. When I first saw it, it looked like a female figure in a white corset. And everything else, there’s no head, there’s no face, it’s just black. It’s sort of dark and mauve and all these other mixtures of dark colors and blurred edges and so forth. But this central part is that light sort of object there, and that object looks like a corset. That was my first reaction. I thought, “This is corsets.” And of course, when I saw the corsets, it looked like corsets, but it looked like it could be a corset costume.

And of course knowing about the history of Paris, and knowing about it being a place where a number of African American ex-patriots, particularly in the arts, went to spend time to drink in some of that abundant blue light, and also to feel a different way. Because though racism existed in France and in Paris, and still exists today, it’s different than the racism that exists in the United States. Certainly it’s totally different than you have in the United States. But, the point was that this engendered to me, because it looked like an object having to do with the stage, I began to reflect on the black figure in the Paris theater.

I also thought about the black writers like Richard Wright and James Baldwin and a whole range of other writers and then the musicians who had all made a sojourn to Paris and found solace there, Miles Davis and before that Louis Armstrong, and a lot of other people—Duke Ellington didn’t stay, but Miles Davis actually stayed a while, and certainly Louis Armstrong stayed a while.
But the writers like Ellis and Baldwin lived there for years. And there were
other musicians who lived there for years.

It represented that to me and so it gave me another view to them. In talking to
Mary about the painting she said, “You asked me about that,” she said, “but
other people have asked me about that and how ‘we saw your painting and
how it had this corset.’” And she said, “What corsets, are you talking about
the same painting?” And then she said, “No, those weren’t supposed to be
corsets. Those are spats.” Then you look at it carefully and clearly can see the
white spats and the shoes. But that even made more vivid the image of Paris
and the theatrical tradition.

Among the first African American performers to go to Europe were minstrel
players. Or vaudeville, minstrelsy and they were very successful in Paris
because Parisians had never seen anything like this, and were really intrigued
by it.

Wilmot: Okay, so, in this piece you actually made an explicit reference. How do you
do this implicitly, musically? How does one make a specific reference to a
musical tradition implicitly?

Wilson: Right, right. Well what I did there in this case was to use a trumpet solo. It’s
not just a regular trumpet solo; it’s a muted trumpet. It’s not just a regular
muted trumpet; it’s a {harmon muted}. Which in this day, at the end of the
century—this wouldn’t have been true sixty years ago—but at this point,
anytime you have a muted trumpet played against a soft background, it
immediately invokes the image of Miles Davis, because Miles Davis did so
much music that way. So you cannot use that sound without invoking or
evoking the musical image of Miles Davis.

Then, when I chose to make it a trumpet solo and the music was slow and
alluded to the blues—because there were clearly places in the music where I
consciously used elements associated with the blues—it was a straightforward
line. On one hand it was very simple, because it was a straightforward line.
There wasn’t all the complicated counterpoint and the kind of stuff that was in
some of the other movements, very straightforward. But that simplicity was an
attempt to get at something very basic which is one of the essences of the
blues: that is, that it’s simple but it’s powerful. Simple in that everybody
understood it’s a three-line structure, where the third line gives you the kicker,
you know, the solution, answers the question. It’s the response to the two
calls. That’s blues form, using that call and response structure. So I was using
that in that movement.

Now, an autobiographical point—I started playing gigs when I was a teenager.
And I played through college, a little bit afterwards but then I really didn’t
play much as a professional jazz musician, because I was busy in school and
doing other things. I played a little bit for myself but I didn’t really continue
that. My chops are not what they used to be. I still play but not at the level that I did. But, that becomes an important part of me. I internalized a lot of the basic sensibilities that are a part of that tradition, and I can understand that tradition. Mary talked about the rain that happens often in Paris and the darkness. Light is a little bit different; it’s kind of dark and sort of overcast and again, touches the ends of things. It sort of flows. But there’s something also very poignant about it that encourages a kind of introspection.

Now even more on an autobiographical note—and I didn’t say this the other day when I was talking about this piece but I think it’s true. You know this because I told you that I had a very close friend who died in the fall. Lifelong high school friend, and we used to spend a lot of time dealing with looking at the latest jazz that was coming out then and talking about it and idolizing the performers of it and so forth. I also reflected back on that experience and his death. So all of that was wound into this sort of poignant piece that was created. Using elements in a more representational way but at the same time there were things also that were not just a straight piece. I mean, there were things that were pretty basic, pretty simple but still something else different.

But the main thing was to capture that mood. A lot of people said, “I really like that second movement,” partially because of the language. The musical language was something that was more accessible. But I think that the other thing is that there was a conscious attempt to try to reflect that painting, and reflect the ideals and the sensibilities that I took to be part of that basic painting.

Wilmot: You said that you’ve known Mary Lovelace O’Neal over twenty years? So she came to UC Berkeley, I think, in the eighties.

Wilson: ’79, ’80 or something like that. So it’s been at least twenty years. I met her because she was a new, young faculty member. By that time I had been around for ten years and I was tenured and she was still going through that process. She was in the arts, I was in the arts, so she talked to me about some of the issues she was facing in the department, some of the issues that she was facing as an artist. So we spent a lot of time talking about that. So I was a kind of mentor for her in terms of bringing her into the university situation, the politics of it all, the dynamics of it all, and explaining how the process works. I met her and her husband, and we became friends, going to dinner and doing things like that. They’ve had us over and we’ve had them over, and I’ve followed Mary’s career. And then the other thing is that—I don’t know if you need to put this on the tape—but at one point Mary was having a tough—no, don’t put this on the tape. I’ll just tell you.

Wilmot: Hold on, please.

[Interruption]
Wilson: So I spent time with Mary, giving her the benefit of my experience of having worked in the university, the complicated issues of personnel and how to put together your best portfolio. I tried to train her to the process of how carefully these things are reviewed and if a person is predisposed to find something that’s not helpful, they can usually find it. But when you put together a case, you want to put together the strongest possible case and you want to make sure that you exercise all your rights. For example, in the personnel review process, not only do you get internal statements of your colleagues, both from the department and the university about the nature of the quality of your work, but they want in depth explanations of your work—why it’s significant, what the trajectory has been by people who are specialists in the area. So you ask for outside people. And then, after you’ve had those outside people whose names you submit, then the chair of that committee then can seek—will seek the names of other people. Because the entire portfolio that goes forward includes the names of people that you have recommended—and these are people you know who are obviously supporters of yours—but then they try to get some names of other people, people you don’t know about, and people who ostensibly are neutral, and who will give their honest opinion of your work. That’s sort of a quality control mechanism, so it’s not just an ol’ buddy idea.

The whole notion of the old boy idea, which the university was accused of, and which in some respects at one time was true, was that at a certain level, let’s face it, at the university, often people are doing esoteric things and people know the other people in the world who are doing that. And so, if they call those same people, who are also your buddies and your friends, the probability is that you’re going to get a certain kind of review. If you open it up not only to the people that they know and that you know that they know, but to other people, then you might get other perspectives. And you have to have enough of them because if you only have three or four then it’s a toss of the dice. You know, you have three or people, they call in someone who never knows you. This person might not be so objective, or the person might be objective but not really understanding what you’re doing and therefore might give you a very negative review. Or your aesthetic might be something that that this person is convinced is antithetical to the whole development of the art. [laughs]

So, you’ve got all of these dynamics going on so you want to make sure that you ask for a broad enough range of views, so that if you got somebody who says, “This is a bunch of crap and I think it’s awful,” then you have somebody reading that who doesn’t understand the dynamics in the profession, doesn’t understand that this person would say that about anybody who worked in this particular area. On the other hand, if you have enough people, the odds are that you’re going to have some who are greatly pros and some who might be negative. Then you’re going to have the people, including your champions as well as maybe some of your detractors, but you are going to have a strong
detractor without any context of why that person is a detractor. So that's the reason for having it.

Wilmot: You said the old boy network, more then than now. So would you say it's gone now?

Wilson: Not completely, no. Not completely, no. It's more then than now because in the past there wasn't a systematic way of doing it. In the past—and I'm talking about when I came to the university and I came to the university in 1970—"affirmative action" was not a word in the vocabulary of things. "Racism" certainly was, but affirmative action wasn't. [laughter] But in those days, the way the universities would recruit people is that somebody in their faculty—and usually they had gone through the process and so they were pretty knowledgeable about what was going on in the rest of the world—and they would say, "Look, we have a position." They'd call up their friends and say, "Who do you know that you think would be great for us here?" And their friends would say, "Well, I just have this great student who I think is the best thing since sex," [chuckles] and then they would give you that name. That's how the basic list would come.

Even in those days, you had to go through the basic process. You interviewed and people liked you or didn't like you; they'd have to review your portfolio, review what you'd done, review what you'd written and so forth. But it wasn't cast the widest possible net; it wasn't public advertisement; it wasn't making sure that you made an effort to try attract women and people who heretofore hadn't been here before. That all comes after '70. That all comes from after the affirmative action thrust. That was one of the reasons why, if you look at the constitution of the university, look at it terms of gender and in terms of race. Prior to that time, it was like 95% men and about 99.9% caucasian. Well, not really, because there were a few Asians around, in the sciences. But in general, it was very disproportionate. And that sort of reflected that people would call people that they knew, and they would call their former professors and colleagues and so these people tended to look alike. So that that's what you meant by that whole system of "Old boy network." Some said it was benign, in the sense that people weren't necessarily consciously racists or sexists, but this is the way that they did it. So it was at that unconscious level, but it was nevertheless still devastating, in terms of the opportunities.

Wilmot: There is the idea that in fact institutions are composed of individuals and each institution is just the sum total of individuals’ collective awareness, the limits of their understanding, imagination, everything like that.

Wilson: Exactly.

Wilson: So say the end of the seventies, what would you tell a young faculty person of color? Somebody like Mary Lovelace O’Neal or another person. If you were
to give them five directives for, not survival, but how to flourish, how to flourish in this environment, what would they be, those five directives?

Wilson: I don’t know if I can think of five right off the top, but I can think of some. And one of them would be—and there all interrelated—and one of them would be first, to understand that the university has a kind of system where external reviews are important or more important than your day-to-day kind of activities. Meaning this, that if the university aspires to be the best in the world—and Berkeley does, some universities don’t but Berkeley is certainly one that does—then your position in your field as viewed by the peers and the experts in that field is very important. And the only way they’ll know about you is that you produce something important. So, that’s publish or perish.

If you just listen to it, publish or perish sounds how harsh and how silly. But in reality, if you think of it in terms of this is a place that wants to focus on excellence; it’s arbiters of excellence are the best people that work in that field as far as we can ascertain. So you have to understand that’s your external world, so that, you have to make a name in that external world. You have to produce something that somebody can review. They aren’t going to know who you are just because you finished your PhD. All that means is that you survived a graduate program somewhere, and so you’ve written something that somebody says is a dissertation. So that’s a key to open, to belong to the club. You at least have minimal qualifications, because you survived it, meaning more that you’ve managed to survive somebody’s program, you’ve jumped through some hoops. Along the way hopefully you’ve learned to develop your critical thinking, you learned to write a little bit better, you learned to compose or create or whatever you do a little bit better than you did before. That’s a hope, not necessarily always true, but that’s what you aspire for.

But then, what you have to do is to produce something out there, whether its scholarship or creative work. It’s got to be something that’s produced in the forum where people who take this seriously come and view. If you’re writing an article, if its published in the Oakland Tribune, that’s fine and your name might be in the Oakland Tribune or [San Francisco] Chronicle or The New York Times or whatever, but that doesn’t carry the weight of a journal in the field, where people are accustomed to look at that and come bring to it with critical inquiry.

So you enter this forum and say, “Okay, I’m grown, I’m going to do like grown people do and I’m going to be able to defend what I do.” So that means that you’re putting yourself out there. And because you know you’re putting yourself out there and you know that people read this journal, you’d better make sure that you reread, you edit, you re-edit, you do the best you can. And then, if you consistently write articles that are accepted first, and then secondly, are refereed—there’s this whole idea of refereed journals—by
people who are eminent in the field, then this is a way of getting a view of how good you are. This is in an ideal sense.

So that in an ideal world, you do it, you produce, you get it out, you go to the forum, you produce. If you produce articles, that’s fine. Even better, the assumption is that you’re going to produce books if you are in a scholarly field. If you’re in a creative field, then paintings or plays or drama or music, but the same thing maintains—it’s got to be reviewed by someone, it’s got to be accepted by somebody, and, in the case of composition, it’s got to be performed by somebody. And that’s part of the review process. So the first thing you have to understand is that in the university, there’s a larger world out there, and it’s not just your college and your department, it’s that larger world in that field and you better make sure that you are known in the field. That’s what sometimes people don’t understand.

Wilmot: What’s the second thing?

Wilson: The second thing is that it is important to take teaching seriously. Occasionally, there are people who buy into the notion that as long as you are feted in that larger world, as long as people think, “Oh, this is a hot person coming into the field,” that everything else doesn’t matter. But teaching does matter. And if you’re very cavalier about your teaching, if you don’t enjoy teaching, if you don’t focus in and treat students right, if you don’t look at their papers and review them and give them feedback, and you take it that, “This is just a means to an end, I really want to be the greatest writer in the world,” then you’re going to run into some problems. Because teaching is important, especially—it’s important all the way.

Now, if you’re a superb researcher and you’re an average teacher, you’re still going to get tenure. If you are a superb teacher and a mediocre or worse researcher, you’re not going to get tenure. Even though teaching and researching or teaching and scholarship or teaching and creative work are equal, the way the university says it is that there’s teaching and there’s research, and there’s community service. And community service is a broad rubric which means everything from doing things for the community literally but also means serving on the committees in the university and agreeing to take on some administrative responsibility. The university works because it’s a shared governance.

I was going to say something a few minutes ago but I forgot. I’ll come back to it because I’m not going to forget it twice. But, all three of those things are what one is judged upon. The community service also means for example, you do write articles for the newspaper, occasionally. You’re an astronomer, okay, “What the heck does an astronomer do?” Somebody in a grammar school says, “Can you come over and talk to my fourth grade about that?” And then you go over and do it. And all that’s on your dossier, because that’s community service, you know. Or if you are asked to be on a board or
something, a lot of professors do that. This board or that board, something having to do with their expertise, that’s community service.

If you serve as an editor for a journal, that’s community service. If you’re a board that gives money away, that’s community service. A whole range of things, all of that stuff, which sort of brings prestige and sort of says to somebody in the world, “This is a composer, the New York Philharmonic did his or her work, the New York Philharmonic thinks it’s important. When they brought him there, they asked him to go and talk to an audience.” That’s community service because that’s supporting the art, and it’s carrying the name of Berkeley with you, because everybody introduces you as a professor at the University of California, Berkeley. So that builds on Berkeley’s reputation as being an outstanding place.

Wilmot: Is there anything else you want to add to this idea of how to flourish? Because I kind of proposed it as a way to talk about some isolated points, but I don’t want to continue to press it as a model if it doesn’t work for you.

Wilson: Oh, yeah, that’s fine. I think those things: understanding what the process is that exists and how it works; secondly, the importance of teaching and community service. I think those are the main things I’d emphasize. Then, the other thing is, be honest with yourself. Different individuals have different strengths. If you’re the kind of person—this rarely happens in the university because, usually in the university, one of the things that you do is talk a lot—so if you don’t have a natural skill of talking and explaining ideas, you develop it, you develop it. Usually one way or the other because you have to do it so often. Some critical thought and being an orator and communicating in both a written and an oral fashion is important.

Wilmot: As far as alliances? On one level, when you were talking, you noticed that there was the university and there was outside the university. Are there any kind of alliances that you think are very important for young faculty persons to make?

Wilson: You need somebody to take you by your hand. It’s really great to have a mentor at the university. The process of itself is complicated. People don’t understand usually unless somebody tells them. Even though, when you come, they give you a big pack of stuff—there’s a faculty handbook that’s about this thick [shows with hands]—but people don’t read that! People say, “Look, I’m at Berkeley because I’m good at doing what I do.” And everybody who comes in, comes in assuming that they’re going to get tenure. And some do and some don’t. It’s about sixty percent maybe do now, between fifty and sixty percent do, and the rest don’t. But if you understand the dynamics of that process and not only the dynamics, but what the basic process is, because then you work harder, understanding that whenever you do anything, you have to keep records of what you do. You have to keep any reviews of what you may have, because you present a portfolio. If you don’t think about that by year four in
the university—you have to be tenured by the sixth year. It’s up or out. Either
the department or the university says okay, or then you have another year, a
seventh year and that’s it; you’re gone. So that if you don’t think about that,
“Seven years is a long time to go, besides I’m good,” if you don’t think about
that until year four, you probably have a problem because the first three
years—you’ve got a problem. But you’ve got to think about it because every
two years, and at the end of four years, there’s a mid-career review where the
department looks at you and says, “What have you done?” And that’s when
you get the warning.

Wilmot: I have a question for you. From what you said before it sounds as if you
negotiated tenure actually outside of the six year process, because you
basically negotiated it as part of your coming here, step one, so how have you
learned these things is my question.

Wilson: Well I learned this because of two things: first, when I came here I had
already taught at Oberlin for five years. The other reason I know so much
about personnel was because in my fourth year I became Faculty Assistant for
Affirmative action—

Wilmot: We talked about that.

Wilson: —and that’s when I had to review. So I know more about personnel than most
people who weren’t deans, because that’s one of the things I had to do. I was
reading all these cases. It was a revelation for me! I didn’t know, “God,
people write all this stuff? They have twelve letters from twelve different
people around the country?” I said, “Wow, this is something! And the cases
this thick? Everything they’ve ever written is there and everything that’s ever
been reviewed? This is really under the gun!” So I said, “Oh boy, this is really
more complicated than I realized.” So I had that experience. I’d really had
seen some very classic cases of people who were on the borderline. The
department said “No,” but they were people who were either suing for one
reason or another or people who you felt were maligned because the
department did this and didn’t do that, or twisted the facts a little bit, or you
had that—. And then you had a couple of cases of people who were just going
through it. “Oh wow, everybody thinks this person is excellent. Now, why?”
So I’d go back and read very carefully about that. And I had to do that in order
to make a fair assessment of critical cases, you know, of women and
minorities. They’d come across and people would say, “They aren’t as good.
They’re good, they’re great, but they aren’t up to our Berkeley standards.”
What the hell are Berkeley standards? There are forty departments and each
department is different. So you had to read that department’s history and
figure out the people they did think were outstanding.

Wilmot: Well, the way that I’ve come to think about that position, largely based on the
conversation that you and I had previously, is that it was a position, the
Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action, was a kind of a position that
essentially was an intervention in informal kind of racism and/or sexism. Essentially, it formalized things that were informal so that they couldn’t go on anymore. So that’s how I’m seeing it at this point. Is that right?

Wilson: Yeah, that’s right. But it was more. It was that, but it was also—depending on who had the position, my position there was to be an advocate and since I was the first I began to define that. This person ought to be an advocate for things. If there was something that was obvious. There were cases with women and minorities where x or y just didn’t do what they should have done, you know. It was patently obvious. It didn’t make sense to push that, because it was clear that, hey, these people weren’t doing what they should have been doing. It was a disservice for anybody else to jump up and down for them because then you would lose any credibility, you know. It would be, “Oh, you’re just supporting anybody who’s a female or anybody who’s an ethnic minority.” There were a few cases like that, but very few. Usually these were people—and they usually were young—they’d gotten this [far] and said, “Oh, this is not what I really want to do. I really want to be doing something else.” So they just didn’t do anything. Didn’t do any of the kind of creative work or the kind of research they should have been doing if they were serious candidates for tenure. I mean, life changes or something, I don’t know. [laughter] Some of those things happen.

But you see, that position could be used in a number of different ways. First, what we did is try and create a systematic way of reviewing, trying to define how a university could be positive and how the university could attract outstanding women and minorities. If you start out with the assumption that white men don’t have the corner on the kinds of skills that it takes to be a Berkeley professor, then you have to look at what’s preventing it, you know. And to what degree are those things willful and to what degree are those things institutional? There subtleties so you had to deal with all of that. And whether they reflect a will.

People still believed, even in 1970, that if there was a husband and a wife, and they both were PhD students together—they fell in love, they got married, they both were outstanding students, they both got PhDs, they both were applying for this position—people would say, “Well, we ought to give the position to the man because the woman is going to have babies anyway, so she won’t be able to hold the position.” Or “Let’s give her the part-time position” or “Let’s make her a lecturer. Put the man on the ladder—.” Now, in case of African Americans they were just saying, “Well, we can’t find any. There can’t be any who would meet Berkeley standards.” Then you look at that and you, “Well, wait a minute, what about x? Have you checked the old boy network? Did you make a special effort?” That was the first thing. “Did you make the special effort? Is it an administrative goal to find women and minorities? Is it important to the institution to have a diverse faculty?” That’s the fundamental issue. And if the chancellor said yes, he believes that to be
important, then okay, “Let’s make that a goal.” That’s when you do affirmative action

Wilmot: At a place—am I interrupting you? Because I don’t want to cut you off—at a place like Berkeley where so much of the weight of decision actually resides with faculty member and their departments—

Wilson: Right. The guild.

Wilmot: The guild. Were there people, departments rather, who showed more commitment or less commitment across the board? How would that work?

Wilson: Yeah! That was tough. That’s a tough one, because the responsibility, the authority doesn’t rest with the chancellor. Let’s put it this way: it’s complicated. It’s like the American constitution, you know—which I’m reading an interesting book about. It’s like this, we have competing priorities, simply put. The question is how much do you put on priority one, priority two? I believe fundamentally that the guild with all of its flaws, in an academic institution, a place that is so-called—to use another cliché—the “marketplace of ideas,” it is important to have a guild. It is important to have a group of people who are peers who judge the work of each other. Even though people can distort it doing that. But it balances out. There are people who balance or counterbalance it, so that’s why you need a large number of people.

I’ve seen the other work, the other place where the faculty is not the arbiter, final arbiter of scholars coming into that field.

For example, my first job was at Florida A&M University. There are many universities in the country like that. Where the focus is not necessarily on being—everybody would like to be the best, but they’re not willing or for whatever reason historically it didn’t happen that way. Where it’s more like the public schools, you know, where it’s a hierarchical system. The superintendent, the principal, the head of the department is sort of like your boss, right? So that the principal is always going to be the principle; the teacher is always going to be the teacher. And that’s why some of the best teachers, once they’re really good, become administrators. They make more money, they have more authority, but they take them out of the classroom. So you have that irony. I think it’s a shame in this country that public school teachers are paid so poorly and then people complain about the schools. Then they slap [slaps hands] and say, “We’ve got to make the teachers perform.” Well, it’s stupid. If you don’t reward people, then you’re not going to get good results. So what happens, in some schools I was alluding to, you have the president and the dean or somebody and they actually make the decisions, not only on long-term goals and long-term structure, but even on quality judgments. What they have to say is more important than what the faculty has to say. I don’t think that’s right because they are divorced from it. They aren’t there. They may have been there a few years ago, but they aren’t there now.
Someone who’s a terrible, terrible teacher, anybody can ascertain that, you don’t have to be a dean to figure that out.

The point I’m making is that in some place where this guild does not exist, there are other people making the decisions. So in some of the worst cases of state—it even happened in Berkeley a few years ago, I can talk about it in a minute—you had people making decisions about people who don’t really have the authority and the background and the expertise to make those decisions. So often you find those in some of the lesser institutions, you know. For example, community colleges. Community colleges can be great, too, and there are a lot of excellent teachers there, but it’s a hierarchical structure. So that’s one of the reasons why you have—if you look at community colleges, frequently you’ll have a person who’s the president who’s never been a good teacher there. They may have been a counselor or something, but they just got involved in the politics of it and they became the president of the thing. And they then make decisions which affect the teachers. But the teachers are not the most important thing, that’s one other thing. So the quality of the place is not really important.

Wilmot: Okay, question: are you a member of Berkeley’s guild?

Wilson: Of Berkeley’s guild? Yeah. Yeah. Any faculty member is a member of Berkeley’s guild. You review things, you have to write letters, constantly. But not only Berkeley’s guild, the whole broader guild, I told you about this external world out there? Graduate students are always asking if you can write a letter or this form or something, and it never stops. Students who were graduate students, twenty years later will say, “I’m a candidate for this, can you write a letter?” But you’re expected to do that.

Wilmot: I was kind of asking because of the way you talk about the guild as this kind of medieval guild so it sounds a little, slightly tongue-in-cheek? That’s why I wanted to check with you.

Wilson: It is tongue in cheek.

Wilmot: But it is serious.

Wilson: It’s serious, too.

Wilmot: And it’s also your life.

Wilson: That’s right. I’m part of the guild, but my view of the guild is a little bit different. See, I know the negative part of the guild. I view the guild as an imperfect system, but a system that is the best that I can think of at this point. Sort of like American politics, American society. It’s flawed and I rail against it all the time, but I can think of nowhere else I’d rather be.
Wilmot: That’s an interesting metaphor. That’s such an interesting parallel to make.

Wilson: And I guess that latter part, “nowhere else,” well there are some other places I can think of. But it’s hard to divorce your whole experience taken together. I’d like to see it made to realize its principles and its ideals. Because it’s never really realized its ideals. It’s one of the most sad and unfortunate things about the American experience. But the fact that people thought about it, thought about inalienable rights and every man, every person as an equal—even though it did say every man. So you get the point.

Wilmot: You’re speaking of the American experience, you’re not speaking of the guild now?

Wilson: I’m talking about the American experience, now. The guild, the guild says quality control. The guild says, “Okay, if you’re going to be in this guild, you’re going to have to be able to make a good pair of shoes. We’re going to inspect your shoes to see if they’re good. If you aren’t good we’re going to kick you out the guild. We won’t give you certification, you know.”

Wilmot: But then there’s this weird thing where the standards for the kinds of shoes and what the shoes are made of and what size they’re supposed to fit, what foot they’re supposed to fit, that’s kind of dictated by the composition of the individuals of the guild.

Wilson: And the {wares?/wearers?} of the guild. The guild is protector of the canon, right? But the canon changes. That’s what we’ve just experienced in the last forty years, sixties. People in almost every field talk about it in very different ways than they did forty years ago. That’s because the guild has the mechanism to change. Now, it’s slow—that’s why when I say its conservative—slow change, and sometimes it moves in a retro fashion. But it does have a mechanism to review itself.

Wilmot: Is this related to note or the point you wanted to make about shared governance?

Wilson: Yeah, this is the point I wanted to make about shared governance: the guild is the mechanism for shared governance, and that’s why administrators at Berkeley—you’ll notice that every chancellor at Berkeley has been a professor. There’s never been a chancellor at Berkeley—there’s been presidents of the university—but there’s never been a chancellor at Berkeley who wasn’t an academic. There are many people in the university who are not academics. But the university privileges the academic because that’s the fundamental purpose of the enterprise. As long as it does that, fine. There are many other places where it’s not true.

Wilmot: There was something that you said at our last talk that I thought was so important. You were talking about institutional change and responsiveness
were comprised—there were two factors that changed institutional change and responsiveness, and the first thing you said was the complexity of this institutional and the second thing you said was the avenues for responsiveness. Does that make sense, does that sound familiar?

Wilson: Yeah. I don’t remember the context.

Wilmot: I’ll think about it and tell you more. The only thing I wanted to ask for is anecdotes that demonstrate this. And I don’t want to ask this right now; I want to turn off the tape now. But I want us to sort of think about that idea of—you were talking about that idea of institutional change and you said there’s two factors, and you said the first thing is that it is a huge organization that’s complex—and that was a comment on the nature of the organization—and then 2) what are the avenues for soliciting responsiveness from the institution.

[interuption, change recording media]

Wilson: Okay.

Wilmot: Okay, so we’re back again. So I posed this question to you about these two points you had raised earlier in terms of surveying the terrain for institutional change and transformation. And that you basically decided that there were these two points: One, that the institution is a very complex institution which really of course informs the way you approach institutional change, and the other is that there are only specific channels of opportunity.

Wilson: Let’s talk about first one, the complexity of it; that’s the easiest to talk about. I want to try to give you some anecdotes that sort of help to clarify that. In the first place, the university is—I use this metaphor of the guild. And that’s only for one aspect. That’s the quality control, the aspect that has to deal with faculty careers, that is if you get tenure or you don’t get tenure and promotions and the personnel process. But the university is also a big business agency and it’s also a part, first, of the larger University of California and then part of the State, the governance, you know, it’s a State institution. So you have these different levels of control: the state controls the money and gives it to the university, gives it to the president of the university; president of the university and then the board of regents also then determines what’s going to happen; and ultimately it comes to the local university; and the university then doles it out to the departments according to some formula that they think makes sense. But you have to understand all of that if you’re talking about institutional change.

An anecdote has to do with the attempt to create programs which fostered affirmative action, when I was Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action. I think I mentioned this before, but I think it’s particularly appropriate here. This was the creation of what we called the Career Development Program. This was a program which was designed to provide leave-time, with
fellowship funding for faculty to pursue their research interests as a consequence of being women and minorities and hence, being asked by the institution to take on additional tasks that other people, that white males didn’t necessarily have to take on. Some chose to, and some did, and some were very active, and that’s one of reasons why we’ve been successful. But it was part of the terrain if you were a woman or an ethnic minority, unless you made it absolutely clear that you wanted to have nothing to do with it. Nobody forced it on you. But it would naturally happen. You’d come in the room and people would say, “Oh!” [chuckles] It sort of sets up a different climate, a different atmosphere.

Well. In order to get this process going, I talked first to the chancellor and the then vice chancellor Heyman, and so they thought this was a great idea and this was exactly the kind of thing that we need. But they also knew that they were part of the larger University of California, and so I had to get approval from the university hierarchy for this. The university hierarchy meant everybody is always interested in damage control, in case this blows up, in case there’s going to be lawsuits. They sent me to talk to the lawyer for campus, Mike Smith, who still is here. And then I had to talk to the legal counsel for system-wide. That was very difficult. Because they always take the position, “Any change might be fraught with danger and as your legal counsel I’d say don’t raise a flag because someone might sue you for reverse discrimination. They were anticipating the Ward Connerlys of the world at that point. And I was saying, “Well, wait a minute, if we’re going to make some intervention, this is basic. This is something to affect affirmative action.” We were being told by the federal government in those days that affirmative action is a goal. Not only that, but in order to achieve federal funds, you have to prove that you’re making—they were in the process of trying to figure that out, they hadn’t said that yet, but this is what they were trying to say—that you should be taking affirmative action. This is affirmative action. So, ultimately we prevailed. But we had to jump through a lot of hoops before we were gone. The program is still going, it’s been very successful, we’ve improved the numbers. The career development program still exists.

Wilmot: Even after [Proposition] 209?

Wilson: Yeah, sure, even after 209. I’m pretty sure it exists, because 209 really had to do primarily with admissions of students, so that’s where it was. But the university still has fellowships and scholarships for people who are green or are green-looking and come from Eureka, you know. I mean, you can have a fellowship designed for people of a certain ethnic background, women, minorities, and so forth. And that still goes on. 209 didn’t wipe that out. 209 simply said you cannot use race as a factor in looking at—as any kind of criterion.

And the Michigan court case which is going on is going to really determine whether 209 was right or wrong, when the Supreme Court finally weighs in on
that. So everybody’s got their fingers crossed about that. But that’s really got to be what it is, because Michigan, and Stanford, and most of Berkeley’s peers still use race as a factor in the admissions process. Berkeley’s the only one that doesn’t because they can’t because it’s a state institution so it’s constrained. Stanford still does it. Stanford wasn’t constrained by that. And Harvard, and Princeton, and Michigan and everywhere else. Berkeley’s the odd person out.¹

So that’s an example of the complexity of how it was, and it goes on and on twenty-something years later.

Now, in terms of issues of intervention, what do you do? In a complex world like this, where are you able to intervene to sort of achieve some change? What are the ways that you can do it? I think, like in most institutions, from an administrative point of view—there are different spheres of influence: faculty has their spheres of influence; the administration has its spheres of influence. Fortunately, as I was saying earlier, the chief administrators always come from the faculty. It builds in kind of a built-in understanding about that, at least on the university chancellors’ level. It seems to me that they are certain kinds of things in any kind of large institution that you want to move. You’ve got to have incentives and you’ve got to have rewards and punishments. Now, “punishments” is a tough word. You can’t really punish anybody. But what you have to do is to make it an incentive for them to try to achieve the institutional goals that you want to achieve. So, that’s where you need a strong chief administrator who is willing to pursue this. But it has to be pursued in such a way that it recognizes the faculty autonomy in certain areas and at the same time makes it worth their while, to use the crude term [chuckles], the Mafioso term.

Wilmot: And also the term that doesn’t rest on their moral [sense].

Wilson: Exactly, exactly. The incentives are: What does the administration control? The administration can veto. For example, if a faculty decides that they’re going to appoint Professor X and they go through this process that we’ve talked about earlier, and they come up with a name and they say that we want

¹ * Grutter v. Bollinger, 2003

The Supreme Court ruled that race could be used as a criterion in school admissions and that it would not be in violation of the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment. The Court found that the University of Michigan Law School’s narrowly-tailored policy was constitutional and appropriate "to further a compelling interest in obtaining the educational benefits that flow from a diverse student body."


The Supreme Court ruled that the University of Michigan's point-based undergraduate admissions policy that took race into account numerically was too mechanical and unconstitutional.
to promote this professor. If the university—if the chancellor reviews it and technically the chancellor has the authority to not approve it. The chancellor can say, “Look, even though the faculty did it, I’ve read all the documents”—by this time it’s a big, thick case—“but it seems that it’s a flawed document. And I cannot support this appointment because even though the faculty thinks that this person is great, I can’t do that. Because I’ve seen other cases that this faculty has sent me, and this guy is nowhere near the level of that. So I’m not going to do that.” So the chancellor then has authority, the final arbiter, to say, “Boom, no. I won’t do that.” Now, the chancellor does this at risk, because the chancellor can overturn the rule of this mechanism. After it goes from the faculty, it goes not just from that faculty but to another quality control mechanism, which is the budget committee. The budget committee reviews it. The budget committee then sets up *ad hoc* secret committees of outside people and everybody investigates that and then comes back with a big report. So it’s been reviewed and reviewed. And that’s why it takes a year for this to happen. Then it comes back to the chancellor, the chancellor says, “Okay, I don’t care what you say, I’m not going to appoint this person.” So the chancellor says, “Boom!” Doesn’t appoint them.” The budget committee says, “Okay, now, the chancellor has vetoed our recommendation so let’s write that down. The chancellor vetoed our recommendation this year of one person.” Let’s say the chancellor’s really a bold person. Maybe the chancellor is a George Bush-type of person who says, “Well, I don’t care about the facts, I don’t want to do this.” That’s my political take on it, anyway [chuckles]. So the chancellor vetoes everybody. So let’s say he has four or five cases, pro or con, that he’s vetoed. At the end of the year, this budget committee makes a report to the full academic senate. Well, this year the chancellor vetoed five of our decisions. If you veto five decisions after going through this process, then you’re saying you don’t really believe in the process. In which case the academic senate as a whole, there would be a motion immediately to say that the chancellor doesn’t have confidence in us, and we, hence, are going to censor the chancellor because we don’t think as an academic senate that this chancellor really respects this process. So they do that. Then the chancellor, his own faculty has said, “Chancellor, we don’t believe that this person understands the dynamic of the university and shouldn’t be here.” Now they can’t fire the chancellor, but they can say this. When they do this, it sends a signal to the Board of Regents who can fire the chancellor. And they say, “Wait a minute, we’ve got a chancellor down here and they’re saying this guy is doing everything else and the guy, for whatever reason,” the chancellor’s star—it creates a real political problem for the chancellor. So chancellors don’t want to do that often but they can if they really feel something’s wrong.

Now, it works both ways. The anecdote I posed is one in which the person came and wasn’t really, in the chancellor’s opinion, qualified for that position, but it works the other way, too. There are a couple of instances—when a person who was a well-known person—a case was sent forward to the chancellor. And it was a very close faculty [vote]. It wasn’t a positive vote. It was either ten-to-nine or something like that, or nine-to-ten. I can’t frankly
remember. But it was like one vote. And usually it’s like two-thirds to one-third at the worst. And that hit the newspapers, too. I don’t want to say the name, but that hit the newspapers. Came to the chancellor and the chancellor at that point had reason to believe even though the faculty had made its views known—they felt in this case this was a person who had some important qualities that he felt to be good for the university and also there was some debate about the nature of what the person did. Because they’re people who do things that are designed for the general world and there are people that who do things for smaller, more esoteric world. If the quality of what they do for the broader public is an esteemed to be very good, then you have this split. Some people in some fields think that doesn’t even count. Other people feel that that does count but it’s got to be at a certain level. It’s really changing the paradigm.

The main point that I’m making about this is incentives and rewards. I got off when I started talking about the intervention of the chancellor. If you look at incentives and rewards, what the chancellor controls is money. Money and academic positions. What happens is that the chancellor can create incentives by saying, “I award the positions; everyone wants more positions,” but the chancellor actually decides who is going to get what position. The chancellor says, “This department has never done anything. This department has really never bought into this whole thing of this whole range of diversity of the faculty. This department has never done this. So I’m not going to give him another position.” Now he can’t say it that way. They just don’t get the position, you know.

Now somebody else can tell them, “Now I think maybe if you were a little bit more responsive to some of the things we think are important, you might have a better chance.” To persuade people to do things, it’s always better if you can get them to buy into it, if you can show them why it’s in their interests to do things rather than the negative stick. The carrot is always better than the stick.

Wilmot: Do you feel that the student protestors would use the stick more?

Wilson: I think student protestors probably would because it’s hard to understand the complexity of the situation. But I think that some chancellors would, too. You can use the stick, but you have to be selective in how you use it. It’s better to do this, if you say, make this public, “We really think this is an important institutional goal, for us to have more women and minorities. So for those departments that are able to find those qualified women and minorities who meet your standards, because you’re the arbiter of standards, then even though you don’t have an FTE scheduled, you come to us and we’ll give you the FTE. If you find the person and it happens to be a woman or minority, and this person that you think is good, it fulfills two goals. It fulfills an institutional goal and it fulfills your academic goals. So, then it becomes an incentive. Because then people are thinking, “Well, hey! We always wanted somebody
and gee! It would be great if we got this person.” So then they go out and look because it’s an incentive for them.

This was one of the things I was preachy about and literally I would go and I saw every chair in the university. We didn’t write it down in big things. Because that would be the first thing you would do to get all the people who opposed this to say, “No, that’s wrong! That’s reverse racism! Blah blah blah!” [yells] You’d be fighting for forty years that battle, and in the meantime lives have passed, time has passed. But on the other hand, if I went around and talked to chairs and said, “Look, I’m telling you that if you find somebody that you think is really qualified and they are a woman or a minority, even if you don’t have an FTE in that position, then you come and talk to me and we’ll see if I can persuade the chancellor.” So that meant that it was a broker position. So people would come and we were able to find some things and we did make some appointments that way. But two things: the people were very strong candidates. They should have been candidates, but maybe the people didn’t have enough FTE at that time when this person was available. So now we say come with us. The chancellor then retained a certain amount of FTE’s so that he could award them if this occurred. At first blush you say, “Wait a minute, how does this happen? Weren’t people in the budget committee upset about this?” Some were, but the point was this—and I was always pushing this idea because it seemed to make patent sense to me—the reason why I was using that model was because that was the model that was used anyway.

For example, a few years earlier there was a big revolution in biology. You know there’s no biology department anymore, there hasn’t been for twenty years. There was this breakdown in molecular biology and the whole science sort of, some amazing discoveries were made and people began to—so there was cellular and molecular biology, there were all these different divisions. And all of a sudden it was totally different, and biology didn’t mean anything as a department because everything was so small and specialized. So what happened is that that instance there were totally new fields being developed. In order to get FTE for that, if all the FTE had been locked into English and economics and stuff, then they never would have been able to do that. So what the chancellor had to do was to hold some FTE’s back, under his discretion, and then when somebody is coming into some hot new project that’s really on the cutting edge, give them the FTE. The same thing is true: if you find somebody in this hot new area, who you think is going really change the way of thinking, change the paradigm of this field, then, “I’ve got some reserve FTE that I can give for this institutional purpose. It’s an institutional goal; you control the money; therefore you can do it.

So chancellors did that. I saw that as a perfect model for affirmative action. Same thing. There was a history of it and so forth, so that’s exactly the way we did it. And just as we didn’t announce that, just as people up through the deans to the chancellor saying, “Look, this is hot stuff. If Berkeley wants to
retain its positions on the cutting edge, then they’ve got to have people here and we don’t have FTEs and you’ve got to give us an FTE.” Fine. My argument was if Berkeley wants to retain its position as a leading institution, and Berkeley believes that diversity is necessary for excellence, then its got to have the same kind of position. That’s what the position was and that’s what we were able to do.

Now, 209 doesn’t allow you to do that, for that reason anyway. You might be able to do it—it’s a gray area because if the person is really good, and they meet the standard that the department [has], and the department is willing to go to bat because they believe this person is really outstanding, they don’t even have to mention race. But if the institution says that we want to increase the number of women and minorities, then the institution can use that in awarding the fellowships if a specific person is very good. It’s a tricky area, and it becomes complex.

Wilmot: Two questions that come out of this and then I’m going to start to wrap down. First is: who were your allies in the guild? And this is under Bowker, Chancellor Bowker?

Wilson: No, this is under—well it started under Bowker, and then Heyman. But as a chancellor, the chancellor is not doing as much of the day to day things, it’s usually the vice chancellor.

Wilmot: And that was Heyman.

Wilson: Heyman was first. Heyman was positively, Heyman was very pro on this. He was very positive on this. I think it has to do with the fact that in the first place, Heyman was a fundamental Jewish liberal, which meant that his whole attitude, he understood racism. As a Jewish person he had his own take on it. It’s not that it’s the same, because it’s not the same, but at the same time there is a lot of affinity with that. And he comes from New York, he was a politically liberal and democratic liberal, so he was disposed to that, that’s just his personal gut reaction to that, he was positive to that. And it was at the time—and you know the Civil Rights movement affected him, he was a supporter of all of that so all of that, he was there. There were many people of that generation who were also supportive, other allies who were in different places. You soon learn—. There are different kinds of things that go on in the university. This happens or that happens and people come to support this so you’ve identified people who are your allies and people who are going to support. So you’re able to move in that direction.

Wilmot: Any people that jump to mind?

Wilson: Let’s see, I’ll have to kick back to that particular time frame. First, from the administration there was Heyman and Park. Park is a New England Yankee, he did his work at Harvard and so forth. His family was wealthy from New
England, Connecticut or someplace like that. Because he was a good friend of Heyman’s, he became convinced, I don’t know if he was naturally as convinced as Heyman was, but he became convinced. Then, because he was the kind of person who liked to make decisions and was a pugnacious kind of person, he liked the idea of the incentives and the disincentives. That resonated with him. But I think ultimately he fundamentally believed in it, too. There other people in the faculty. There was a guy—I’m can see the face now, a guy who taught math and started the PDP [Professional Development Program]—

Wilmot: Leon Henkin?

Wilson: Henkin, somebody like Henkin you could always depend on because he was very active in the PDP program and had done that kind of thing. There were a bunch of people who were there. Plus, in general almost all the black faculty. At that time, there was no—what’s the guy in linguistics now with Ward Connerly type views?

Wilmot: I know what you mean, John “Wha”-something [John McWhorter]. Walt, Walter, something like that. It’s two last names.

Wilson: Something like that. The black faculty was more involved. There were more white faculty, too, but I just can’t think of all the names; I can see the faces. But there was a critical mass of people who believed in this and so we were able to move on this. And I’ll tell you another person who was really positive, Doris Callaway. Did you know who Doris Callaway was? Doris Callaway was the first woman, the first female who was at the very top echelons of administration. She was the provost. At that time there was the chancellor, there was the vice chancellor; Bowker was the chancellor, Heyman was the vice chancellor. Then Heyman became the chancellor and Park who was the provost of college of letters and sciences became the vice chancellor. So they just all moved up a step. At the time the administrative organization were the vice chancellors, then there were the other vice chancellors for business and for development and all that kind of stuff and student, undergraduates and so forth. But the powerful ones were the academic ones, the vice chancellor. And then under the vice chancellor there were two provosts: one for college of letters and sciences, and one for all the professional schools. And that includes—you were in which school?

Wilmot: College of Environmental Design.

Wilson: College of Environmental Design. All of those reported, there was a dean for each of them and they all reported to a provost and the provost was Doris Callaway. And Doris Callaway was a very interesting woman. I didn’t know this at first. It turned out that her husband had been black, and she had a daughter. An interesting woman. And she came from the sciences, I think she
had been in the School of Public Health or something like that? I’ve forgotten. She was in the right area.

So that all worked out. Because we had the two provosts and the vice-chancellor were all strong advocates of this position. Unequivocally strong. Because everybody had confidence that we weren’t doing anything stupid, that we were to trying to change things, and we did change it to a different extent.

Wilmot: Were there some departments that took advantage of this incentive/disincentive and were there other people who didn’t?

Wilson: Oh. Yeah. There were several who take advantage of this because it mostly just made good sense. I think College of Environmental Design was one that did that. There were others. Some of the departments that we had the toughest time in getting more women and minorities were political science. Political science was really—I think that there are some women now. I don’t think there’s a minority in the political science department now. There may be some minorities, but I don’t think there are any African Americans in the department. For whatever reason. English was slow, but you see English was so large, so you expected them to be able to do that. They were slow, not only with minorities but slow with women. I mean there were some women who were already there. Eventually there were more, and now a significant number of them.

Wilmot: Who came in and took that position after you? Now, I notice from your bio-bib that you were there from 1975, 1976, and then you went on sabbatical and came back in 1979 as an acting—We talked about this before, it was somewhat confusing. In any event, who took it up after you?

Wilson: The first person who took it up, I think, was Bill Shack.

Wilmot: You were first and then there was Shack. Now when he came on, did he—

Wilson: I think it was Rodney Reed. I’m not sure about this order, but I think you gave me a list of that, once? You got it from somewhere?

Wilmot: I think I may have. I’ll find it again.

Wilson: Bridget Green who works at that office, probably—She didn’t work there when I worked there, but that list that you have, the old telephone book, it’ll list it as public information. But it was myself, Bill Shack I’m pretty sure, then I think Rodney Reed, and then Bragg, Pete Bragg. And then I think it was Jones, Reggie Jones. I think Reggie Jones was the last African American. Then I think it was Genaro Padilla. And then it was—The other thing that happened with that position, it gave the top administration the opportunity to meet and to know people on a day to day basis who were people of color. So
several of those people subsequently did other administrative things; like Bill Shack became Dean at the graduate school, Genaro became vice chancellor for undergraduate affairs, and still is. Then I came back as assistant chancellor for international affairs, and associate dean with the graduate division. Because a lot of international affairs dealt with graduates from all over the world. That’s one of the reasons why I was very disappointed to hear the president decision of canceling, or dis-inviting or delaying the arrival of the students from Asia. Because that sent a shock through the community. Even though SARS was there, even the World Health Organization thought that was really sort of draconian because you have a screening mechanism and any disease can happen any time.

Wilmot: Well I think this whole antiterrorist thing that has set the tone for other draconian measures. Let’s close for today.

[End of Interview 8]
Wilmot: Interview number nine, Olly Wilson, May 19th, 2003. I wanted to start off today asking you about leaving the post of Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action. When you left that post, did you feel hopeful?

Wilson: Yes, when I left that position I did feel hopeful. I was hopeful because the position had been established which meant that institutionally there was an advocacy position for affirmative action within the central administration, that also had access to the chancellor and all of the chancellor’s top administrators. Because the chancellor had a cabinet, and the Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action was a member of the cabinet, so you were privy to what was going on, what the thinking was and you got to know people and get a sense of their perspectives. Their educational perspectives, but their perspectives in general.

This meant that you weren’t coming in as an adversary or as an outsider but as a person who was inside the university, knew the administration, knew the faculty, understood the dynamics of the university and had this particular advocacy position. The position had become institutionalized, meaning that a person would serve for that position for at least a couple of years, and return to that. The position was also one that was designed for tenured faculty members, so you had to be a tenured faculty member, which meant that you understood something, as we did, about the medieval guild as I refer to it.

At the same time it’s not something you were devoting your life to, because you can become jaded and can also burn out, and besides, ultimately, it’s not the kind of position that is a direct stepping stone to other administrative positions. And it’s a part time position, too. You’re teaching this half time and then you’re doing this half-time, and that worked out fine as far as I was concerned, it was certainly not something that I wanted to do all the time.

Wilmot: Was it too much to have those kinds of—?

Wilson: No, it wasn’t too much, I thought it was the right balance in those years. But remember, it was during those first years that we began to establish and to create some kind of administrative procedures that subsequently became the norm. Eventually, I think the position became quite more involved, but in a different way, because you had to administer a lot of things; you had to review all the cases, which I was doing. But there were other initiatives that were developed over the years, so now you’ve got two or three additional initiatives, plus you have reviewing functions and so forth, and that had to be shared with somebody else. Initially after I left, I know it did become essentially a full-time position but with two different people, because the responsibilities that I had as the Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action dealt with both women and minorities.
The women faculty felt that there should be a position, at least a halftime position, focusing specifically on women because of different kinds of problems, related issues but some real fundamental differences, too. After I left, I don’t think it was immediately after I left, but shortly after I left, they created two positions. One was a faculty assistant for affirmative action, the other was a faculty position for gender equity or something like that.

Wilmot: Do you know who spearheaded that?

Wilmot: There were a group of women who were faculty members who were involved. I can’t remember all the names. I know that Sue Irvin Tripp, who was in psychology, was certainly involved in that. I know that Doris Callaway, who was then the vice chancellor for professional schools and colleges, I know certainly supported that idea. I think one of the first persons to have that position was—what’s her name, she just left to become president of Smith College, she was the dean and then the vice chancellor, I’m embarrassed I can’t think of her name right now—she was involved. [Carol Tecla Christ] She was involved, matter of fact, there were several people like her who moved into administration through that position, as happened with some African American people, or Chicano people who moved into that position. Positions like that that subsequently became involved in higher administration, because it brought them to the attention of the chancellor and the vice chancellor. And also gave them the opportunity to discover what were the issues, from an inside point of view, and they determined if this is something they wanted to do or not wanted to do.

Wilmot: Now you just said that you watched in your tenure at the university, that those issues from the beginning, of gender and race were conflated, gender and ethnicity, race, diversity issues. In your experience—this is a hard question, I’m having trouble asking it—how do those issues need to be navigated differently here at the university?

Wilson: I think that the magnitude of both of those issues—and magnitude not only in terms of the sheer amount of work that’s involved, but the complexity of the issues—requires that ideally in an institution as large as this, I think that there should be at least two full-time people: one dealing primarily with faculty and faculty issues having to do with racial, affirmative action in general, and then I think in the case of gender equity, there needs to be another person who focuses on that. And yet, they work together. Matter of fact, our offices were—there was kind of a suite and there was a Faculty Assistant [for Affirmative Action] on one side and there was a gender assistant on the other side. Which made sense; they talked to each other all the time, because there were similar kinds of issues. There were a wide range of issues. With minorities, particularly African Americans, Chicano Americans, there were issues having to do with gaining access, finding the right people, creating the kinds of programs and the kinds of sensitivities, making the university sensitized to what it meant, the special burdens these people had to share as
being minority faculty members with responsibilities in the community, responsibilities in the institution, and responsibilities within the faculty and so forth. So, that was a complex set of problems.

One the other hand, in case of the women, they had some of those issues, too. Particularly black women, or Chicana women with the same issues black men had. But in addition they had a special burden as being women. And it turned both on its head, two times. For example, a black woman who was an extraordinarily gifted black woman could be seen as a person you counted twice: On the one hand it’s a black and a minority and on the other hand it’s a woman. So it’s a plus.

So just as the men have this pressure, the women have this double pressure, because they have the pressure of being a woman, and therefore being attractive, being a counselor, being sought out not only by black women, but by women in general because they see some affinity. Even in terms of the discipline. Sometimes people are focusing on certain aspects of a discipline which are viewed differently by a man and a woman, just as in a discipline that may be viewed differently from the perspective of a person who is an African American as opposed to a Caucasian. So you have all these, which become immensely complex.

But the other fact was that there was an existing group of women who clearly were capable of being appointed to the ladder who were not appointed to the ladder because of tradition, because of assumptions, a whole range of things. There were a disproportionate number of women who were lecturers, wives or spouses or significant others of people who were on the ladder, and they came as “two-for.” You had the women as the lecturer and the man as the full professor, even though in some instances they were equally qualified.

Wilmot: Are you saying that this was different, in contrast to, there wasn’t as an easily identifiable group of African American or Latino [candidates ] whereas—.

Wilson: Exactly. The eligible pool of African Americans and Chicanos was smaller. I mean the number of black PhDs is still shockingly small. And in certain areas it’s even appallingly small. Whereas women in general, certainly since the 1960s, have increased significantly in numbers, so much so that in some fields it’s almost fifty percent. Fifty percent in population, it’s not statistically surprising that it ought to be fifty percent. Except for cultural assumptions. So you’re having more and more women coming through.

But you still have the glass ceiling, in the sense that women come through, but traditionally the view was that “We don’t want to have too many women; women get pregnant, women get sick, women have hysteria.” [laughs] You know all the assumptions that people make. But once people begin to recognize that, began to speak to it and address it in a positive way, then you had a greater number of people. Which meant the progress, the number of
women in faculty positions, was very good. Nothing perfect, but it was a lot better.

So over 10-15 years, I imagine that from the time that I first started in this capacity, in 1974, the percentage of women was decidedly less than ten percent. It must have been about five percent or something like that, five to ten percent. I am pretty sure that it was considerably under ten percent. Now—and I’m guessing because I’ve long since stopped paying close attention to these numbers—women now comprise twenty, twenty-five to thirty—I wouldn’t even be surprised if it was close to forty percent, it’s probably not forty percent, it’s probably more like thirty-five. Which is still low but it’s compared to the less than ten percent. Whereas minorities were less than one percent. Now it’s still probably less than one percent, but it’s probably a higher fraction of that than it was before. We moved from maybe sixteen, seventeen to maybe forty-five, fifty.

Wilmot: It’s been said that women, white women in particular, really gained a great deal as a result of affirmative action, imagined first to gain access for ethnic minorities.

Wilson: But the pool was different. In fairness, the pool was different, the background was different. Let’s face it: the history of discrimination against women in general, though it’s been deplorable, it’s never been as bad as minorities, and minority women were, of course the most discriminated against. So we’re starting from different places. The results reflect that.

Wilmot: My question around that is, were people in the group that orchestrated for women committed also to seeing those doors opened up for ethnic minorities?

Wilson: It depends on the women. There were some women who saw it as a battle, who saw it as it’s us or them. I say that, and I say that somewhat blatantly—nobody really articulated it that way—but it’s clear that the perspective of some people was, “Hey, we have to do this,” because they only saw things from their perspective. Listen, people who have been personally aggrieved really sometimes come forward in a way that really reflects that, they never get over it. This is women or minorities or anybody who’s been personally offended because somebody really did them wrong in a bad way. They never get over it and so the approach to everything is very, very pugnacious and a very, very difficult, competitive attitude. So they walk in the door with a bang. This is speaking as much about personality as it is anything else. So you have plenty of that.

A lot of the people sort of saw it as related, and I’d say the majority of people with whom I dealt saw it as related. They saw the relationship of the gains that one could potentially achieve in affirmative action policies and programs being related and positive to both their struggle as women and minority struggles as minorities. So there was an alliance. The person I was trying to
think of before just popped into my head, Carol Christ, and she also came to that group. A perfect example of this positive attitude was Doris Callaway, who I think I mentioned before, who was I think in science. I think she was in biological sciences or something or maybe in nutrition. She was very distinguished in her field. She rose to be an administrator, by her choice, too. Because some people view administration as a negative kind of thing, they never get involved in it because of the work and because it takes a lot of time. It’s difficult to maintain one’s research or creative work while you an administrator which is one the reasons why I never wanted to be a full-time administrator.

At any rate, Doris was very positive, she understood that positive advances made in affirmative action in general accrue down to women as well as minorities. She was a very sharp person. That’s the more positive one. I can’t think of anybody who represented that other pole.

Wilmot: I’m wondering, if you had any perspective on this. This may be a funny arena to talk about. When people talk about the feminist movement, feminism was kind of largely imagined both by white feminists and often by women of color as a white women’s movement. I’m wondering if that played out in any way in terms of the way that people were imagining access for women at the university.

Wilson: No question. Some of the major issues for example that were articulated during the early years of this, had to do with the first women who were lecturers being seriously considered for movement to the ladder. That was a very strong issue. And the constituency for that were primarily white women who were spouses—who were and had been in some instances spouses of men who were appointed. They both met in graduate school or undergraduate school, they both pursued the same degree, they both became academics, they both became scholars and so on. Though sometimes the children would start coming and the women would step out and the husband goes on because of the cultural norms.

As a result five years later you sometimes have a very bitter woman who, as an equal scholar, has come back to do work, but because she missed the five years, ten years for child care, she’s not seen as a viable candidate anymore. So she’s appointed a lecturer, which means that she teaches more because lecturers teach more than professors, and she’s feeling like she’s being overworked. And if it were compounded by the fact there was a divorce and the man’s married again, she’s struggling along, and overworked and underpaid, and so she’s feeling really put upon with good reason. So often one of the first issues that came up about equity was, “Wait a minute, you’ve got all these women who are lecturers that have not been treated right for by the institution. So we’ve got to address that.” That was essentially a white woman’s problem, because there weren’t any black women who were even lecturers, so that’s one of the things.
Another issue that’s related has to do with pregnancy issues. At the time, when you were pregnant it was like a disability. You have to take off disability. There was no special institutional response to the special issue of pregnancy. Men don’t get pregnant, women get pregnant. So until the university was sensitized about that—that again reflects a middle class, primarily in this arena, a middle class white woman’s issues. Although the results could affect everybody, it wouldn’t have been the first issue that a group of black women would be dealing with, they would have been dealing with basic issues of getting a position period, you know. You have all of that being part of it. Those were some of the ways in which those values played out.

The other thing that happened earlier on is that the Woman’s Center on campus was established. And that was a place that was designed to help foster scholarship, which dealt with specific issues, especially social issues, but also issues in the humanities that reflected from the perspective of a woman. So it was an interesting and innovative kind of center. But initially, most of the issues that were dealt with were really primarily white women’s, upper middle class white women’s issues. At first I think it was like a study group and then it developed into a full center.

Wilmot: Steady group or study group?

Wilson: I think it was a group of people who were just interested in this and it didn’t have the status of an organized research unit which meant that it didn’t have money given to it, it didn’t have a building, didn’t have a place where people could come and meet. It was kind of an informal study group.

Wilmot: I just didn’t know if you had said “study” or “steady.”

Wilson: Oh, steady, steady, steady group. One of the first directors of that was Margaret Wilkerson, and Margaret became the director of the Women’s Center. Under Margaret’s leadership I think it certainly broadened. Some of the issues were still there and still important issues, but clearly Margaret had a different perspective, and I think that reflected on the center, and made it stronger. She was the director of that center for a long time, five, ten years.

Wilmot: I should know this, but I don’t. Can you pose to me some kind of timeline for when the group transitioned into a center? Any kind of five year range would be helpful.

Wilson: I would imagine probably four or five years before it became a center.

Wilmot: That was in the early seventies?

Wilson: That was in the seventies sometime, sort of the mid to late seventies. Probably didn’t really become a center until the late seventies, or probably started as a
study group enterprise probably in 1974, 1975, 1976. Probably became a center about ’78, ’79, maybe as late as ’80, ’81. Margaret I think was there in the late eighties. That timeline seems about right.

The other thing, African American women were always strategically trying to figure out to what degree do we separate our special issues as African American women from the broader African American group. I think often, since the numbers were so small, people said well at this point let’s work together on some of the larger issues that we all concur on. Those who also had issues that were consistent with the women’s movement, and the women’s group participated in that, but I think the bulk of them still worked within the African American groups such as they were.

Wilmot: Are you thinking of anyone in particular?

Wilson: I’m thinking of the African American women who were prominent then. Like Barbara Christian, like Margaret Wilkerson, like—well, Jewel [Taylor] Gibbs came a little bit later—but certainly Barbara and Margaret and then, as I said, Jewel Gibbs and Mary O’Neal. Mary O’Neal and Jewel Gibbs probably came about the same time.


Wilson: Yes, around that time. And they came in different ways. Mary O’Neal—Jewelle came in, I think Jewelle came in as an assistant professor, too, even though she was older. But she was in a different field but she was working primarily in political psychology, but then she got involved in social welfare, and then she came. Her appointment in the university was at the School of Social Welfare.

Wilmot: In what ways did you act as an ally to the African American women in the academy at UC Berkeley?

Wilson: Well, as a Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action, one of the things that the faculty assistant did a lot was to listen to a lot of stories.

Wilmot: What kind of stories?

Wilson: Well, stories! People would come, they’d be upset, they didn’t know what to do, they felt they were getting slighted, and everybody’s afraid, a great deal of

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2 The Center was officially established in October, 1972 as The Center for The Continuing Education Of Women. By 1980, the Center’s role as a catalyst for expanding women’s educational opportunities was reflected in a new name, The Center for the Study, Education and Advancement of Women. Under the direction of African American Studies Professor Margaret Wilkerson, the Center received research grants, sponsored campus-wide research conferences and promoted the development of feminist scholarship and research skills.
apprehension having to do with tenure, because remember, these are people who academically have always been the stars. They’re very bright, they do very well in their field. Maybe they didn’t do much in grade school, but somewhere along the line something went off [snaps fingers] and they really got focused on this and they did very well, so they’re high achievers.

Wilmot: I asked this question about were you an ally and in what ways were you an ally to your colleagues, women colleagues. And you responded with this sort of outpouring of “Everyone came and told me stories!” And now of course, I’m like, “Ah, stories!”

Wilson: Some of which I remember, some of which I don’t. And different personalities. But basically it amounted to this: as a visible advocate for affirmative action that’s in the institution, that is a tenured black professor that’s positively disposed towards this, that has the ear of the chancellor and the vice chancellor on these issues.

When people felt that [they were experiencing] real or imagined problems, they would say, “I’d better talk to you because I’m coming up for tenure.” And there’s a great deal of anxiety for anybody coming up for tenure, so being able to talk to somebody about the process, because—this is not always true but sometimes, unlike the majority of many white faculty members, people who have established close personal relationships, so they have a mentor relationship with somebody, they can talk to them. “Look, I’m coming up for tenure. What should I do? I’ve got this offer to give this great speech down at somewhere. How much does that count? Is that great if I can get my name in the paper and I’m always doing something. Is that as important as maybe working on a book?”

Because you really don’t know. The newspaper, the Berkeleyan, or whatever you read has [claps hands in applause] kudos to Charlie Brown, kudos to Mary Smith. “Well, no, that really is not that important. It’s more important for you to get that article done or that book done. Because that external group of your own peers in that field is going to look more positively on that rather than you going to make a speech to a thousand people somewhere and revving up everybody. I mean, that’s cool, but that's not the criteria that’s going to be used for you to get tenure at Berkeley.”

So that’s a simple example but there are others. In terms of you look around the department, you notice that most of the people in your department have got a close relationship with a senior person. You don’t. And it’s complicated by the fact that first you’re African American, secondly you’re a woman, and you don’t want to give the wrong signals to people, that maybe you’re interested in them and maybe they’re interested in you. So it makes it complicated.
I’m not going to name names, but I remember a case where at least one woman came and said, “I’ve got this jerk in my department who’s trying to hit on me. I’m really not interested in him, but he keeps coming on pretty strong, and he’s tenured and I’m not, how do I deal with it?” Well, part of it is the smarts of how you deal with anybody if you aren’t interested in that. On the other hand, this was complicated because this guy had a reputation of hitting on people. Not only black people but anybody! It was kind of a tough thing for the person to deal with. So we talked about it. Sometimes just talking to somebody helps you. I talked to her and said, “Hey, you should just confront him and tell him you aren’t interested and to back off.”

So she wondered about the possible ramifications of that kind of response. I was saying, “Yes, well, you know, there might be some, but as long as you’ve made it clear. You’ve talked to me so as far as the records are concerned if it ever comes up, I can say that you did talk to me on this day and you did mention this. So it’s not like you’re doing this, you’re saying this because you didn’t get tenure. You said it before the tenure issue comes up, and the case is not going to go on until six months from now.” More importantly, there are issues like how much does teaching count and is that really important or do I really ignore that, or what do I do, and how do I develop a portfolio. Things like that.

Wilmot: You talked about that last time a great deal.

Wilson: Yeah, so it’s those issues that really—especially those issues that have to do with women. For example—I don’t mind telling you this, I’m sure she’d tell you this—Mary O’Neal had a hell of a time with some people in her department, some other women, some white women who couldn’t stand her and she couldn’t stand them. It was a real battle. She felt that this one woman really had it in for her, she didn’t respect the work of this woman as an artist. She assumed that this woman didn’t respect her work and she probably didn’t. It was a real battle. So that was one of the reasons why I actually was asked to write her case. The woman happened to be chair at this point. I said, “Go to the dean and tell the dean that. It’s happened before, go to the dean and tell him you request to have somebody who is an outside person to do that.” So that’s what she did.

The whole range of things, questions about “my boyfriend teaches at X on the East Coast. I teach here. We’ve got this long distance relationship going on. I’ve got a job offer from there, but this university is much better than that university. How do I begin to initiate at least some dialogue between him and a department here? Maybe we can get him to come here.” So, those are the things you’d get involved in and sometimes it would work and sometimes it wouldn’t. But you can imagine all of these things occurring.

Wilmot: It’s interesting to me because part of what I hear you saying right now is that in some ways your job was to be a witness. Maybe you’ve said this before
many times, so that you’ve added another loop in communication so that people weren’t in one-on-one situations that involved issues of power, issues of race, so that there was one more ear there, to legitimize their reality.

Wilson: It was a position to create another mode of intervention in the system. That can work both ways, and I was fully conscious of that. And I’ve known of some situations where it did work in the opposite way, where the person in this position, ostensibly an advocate, who in fact can become another mode of protection for the administration. That is, eyes and ears of the administration, the straw boss kind of mentality where you get early information about something that’s coming down the pike.

The university, of course, as an institution, doesn’t like negative publicity. So, if something bad is going to happen, somebody’s really teed off, they feel they’re getting screwed by the department, they might then say that I’m going to the EEOC, I’m going to the NAACP, I’m going to Jesse Jackson, I’m going to anybody I can go to and scream from the highest rafters that I’ve been ripped off because people don’t want me because I’m black. Well maybe with this position, somebody’s talking to somebody and saying, “Don’t do that, you’ve got to work inside the system.” You can be seen, really, as a person whose ultimate job is to protect the administration. It can work that way. If you aren’t personally an advocate, and if you aren’t a person of integrity yourself, then you can use this to get a pat on the back from the administration, because you’re protecting the administration.

If you’re in that position, you believe fundamentally in affirmative action, and you’re pushing it and you are the advocate and you take the position of advocate and you push it as far as it goes as an advocate, as opposed to being an institutional protector; you’re protecting the institution and this happens to be the position you have. I can see it work that way. In fact, given the dynamics of the institution, given the wide range of attitudes on subjects as controversial as affirmative action, there were even some deans and some administrators who really did view that position as something to protect them. That is, a dean who sort of assumes, “I’ve got Professor X out there. I don’t think she’s very good. I didn’t want her to be here in the first place—”.

In terms of my experience, this happens more in the case of white women than in the case of blacks, in general. But there were instances where this white woman who happened to be there, maybe some of the faculty, maybe a majority of the faculty, and the dean and everybody thinks she’s a pain. She comes to me, and from my perspective the person has a legitimate complaint. I take it as a legitimate complaint. As a matter of fact, I’m predisposed to take it as a legitimate complaint. The dean says, “Well, you’re in administration, you understand.” So they’re assuming something and you have to say, “I hear what you’re saying but I don’t view it that way.”

Wilson: Different allegiances projected on you.
Wilmot: Exactly. “Well, you’re an administrator and you’re supposed to protect me. Your goal is to protect the institution.” That’s one of the reasons why it was really critical that this position be a faculty member, a tenured faculty member. And that’s the reason for tenure. You don’t have to kowtow to anybody.

Wilmot: So, just to kind of clarify. You’ve talked about this having allegiances in different places. At any time while you were in this position, did this ever cause any problems for you?

Wilson: Not really because it was very clear what my allegiances were.

But I did want to make this point, because I remember feeling this very acutely as I looked around at other institutions. Remember this is the early seventies and the term affirmative action was just coming into vogue, and it was interesting to see how different institutions approached that. Frequently institutions thought that the way you deal with that, is that you have a person, usually a minority, to have the position of affirmative action officer. And this person covers affirmative action over the full range of the institution, in staff, faculty, and students. They are essentially an advisor to the president or the chancellor. They are reasonably well paid, but that’s a fulltime job. It’s sort of the special assistant to the president, affirmative action, special assistant to the chancellor, affirmative action, or sometimes called the affirmative action officer. Often this person was an administrator, an administrative type person, sometimes who had come up through the ranks, had worked for the institution for years, was a staff person and had risen because of good work and other things and become—this was a staff position. So their loyalties were to the institution. Now, their loyalties may have been, depending on the person, to affirmative action, too, and often they were. But you were in a catch situation because as a staff person, especially as a nonacademic, you were serving at the pleasure of whoever the chancellor is. Often, that means that your loyalties have to be to that person first. It’s conflicted. If you happen to have a chancellor who really believes in the system, “Go do it and I’ll support you,” fine, but then the chancellor runs into problems, then the chancellor says, “We’ve got to back away from this.”

Now, under no circumstance, whether a person is that kind of affirmative action officer, or a Faculty Assistant to Affirmative Action Officer, the person still doesn’t have the ultimate authority, even the faculty assistant for affirmative action didn’t have the ultimate authority. But you could always quit with impunity. You always could say, “Look, if I’m doing this, and I’m pushing you to go this way and you don’t really want to go this way, I’m wasting my time so I don’t need to be here.” And it wasn’t quitting like losing your job, moving your family, can’t support your family, you’re gone. I didn’t come to Berkeley as a Faculty Assistant to Affirmative Action and as a matter of fact, I didn’t want to do it for very long because I wanted to do other things. But I wanted to do it because I believed in it, got it started, had a vision, and a
sense of direction as to how this could really impact policy in a positive way, and also implement some things that would happen in a positive way.

So there it’s a rather unique structure. But I saw in other institutions, because there were meetings going on all over the country about how do you do it and often I would go to meetings and the people who had a position similar to mine, were people that were from that staff model. It was very difficult, because often these people didn’t really understand the guild aspects of the university. And so they would say, “I told the chancellor we’ve got to do this and this and this.” And I’d say, “Well, it’s not going to work that way, because—. But most of the people really didn’t understand that. It depends on the institution they were coming from. If it were an institution that was more like a community college situation, the president did have more authority, but the president was less likely to want to exercise it. [chuckles] So it’s a complicated issue.

But the faculty assistant did make sense, and built into that was the assumption that people were going to come and serve for a few years and then go out and go back because we can also get jaded, because you’re fighting a lot of battles. So you do it for a while and you go somewhere else. No, because I was clear on what my priorities were.

Wilmot: Last question on this, what kind of advice did you give your successor?

Wilson: Who was it? It was Bill Shack I think. I think pretty much the same thing that we were talking about now: understanding what it is, the limits, the advocacy, which has to be paramount, making sure that you have access to the chancellor or to the vice chancellor. Whoever you’re reporting to, make sure you have access to them. Have a weekly meeting, private meeting, every Thursday from 10 to 10:30 or whatever. Have them. That was important because otherwise these people get incredibly busy and their assistants who are scheduling things are constantly, “You’ve got to do this, we’ll schedule this out. Do you really need this? Is there anything that’s pressing with that?” People are just trying to protect the person. If you’ve got a standing meeting, bang. You can go to the standing meeting. “I thought I’d just let you know that this, this, this happened. Good, see you later, bye.” You’re not wasting your time or his time, or her time. In this case it was his time. It’s critical that you have that standing meeting because otherwise out of sight, out of mind.

Wilmot: Let’s stop for a minute and then I’ll turn to the subject of asking you about Barbara Christian. I just wanted to know when and where you met Barbara Christian?

Wilson: I met Barbara Christian in Berkeley, and I met her—oh, I think Barbara must have come to Berkeley either the same year I did or less than two years after. It was either 1970, 1971, or 1972, I can’t remember exactly when. At that time there was no black faculty organization or any meeting or anything like that—
but I met Barbara through her husband, David Henderson, who was a writer. David I knew because he was a friend of another writer who was a friend of mine, Eugene Redmond, who taught at Sacramento. Redmond liked to organize conferences. He organized a number of conferences a year at Sacramento, and one of the persons he invited was David Henderson. So I met David. David took me to his house and introduced me to his wife, who was Barbara Christian. And so that’s how I met Barbara Christian.

What was interesting, at the time, David was working on a book about Jimi Hendrix—he was one of the first guys to work on a book about Jimi Hendrix—and we were having discussions about Jimi Hendrix from a musical point of view, as a social phenomenon and so forth and so on. Our views were slightly different about Jimi Hendrix. That’s another whole story.

Wilmot: How so?

Wilson: Well, let me talk about Barbara because we’ll never get around Barbara, and then we’ll get into David and Jimi Hendrix. Barbara was a very nice person, very nice, but you go to somebody’s house, you meet somebody’s wife, “Hello how are you doing?” and we continue our discussion. I knew who she was because when she came to the university she was the first black woman appointed to the ladder rank faculty, so her picture was in the paper. Was it system-wide? I didn’t know if it was system-wide. She was easygoing, very quiet, she had this strong Jamaican accent.

Wilmot: I think she was St. Martin or St. Croix, I’m not sure, an island with a St.

Wilson: I thought she was from Jamaica [she is from St. Thomas, U.S. Virgin Islands.] She probably wasn’t from Jamaica. Anyway, very English accent and you know what that means? [imitates English accent] It means where you are in society, and Barbara comes from a very accomplished family. I think her father was a physician or a judge or something. Her brothers and sisters were all accomplished and successful people. But she was very much an unassuming kind of person. That was the first time I met Barbara, indirectly through David.

Over the years, as faculty began to meet, I began to see more of her and to get a sense of her personality and a sense of her classic style as an individual. Barbara was an extraordinary teacher. She also was a brilliant researcher and was doing pioneering research in African American women writers, particularly novelists. And so over the years there would be different events where she would invite somebody who was coming through to give a talk. There were many discussion that happened around that.

Eventually, as we became closer friends, we often talked about collaborating on things. As Mary said [talking about art/music collaboration with Mary Lovelace O’Neal], we talked about the three of us doing a course together:
African American art, African American music, African American literature. And to do it as a group, we talked about that. But we’re all very busy people and we never got to do it. The closest thing I came to doing something like this—well, I collaborated with Mary on this piece—but the closest thing I got to do with Barbara was something called the Humanities West. It’s a series of lectures that are presented by this agency that supports the humanities. And they usually present it over at in San Francisco at one of the theaters.

Basically it’s an open thing, people pay money for people to come and give a lecture. There was a lecture series that was scheduled about the Harlem Renaissance. Barbara talked about African American literature; I talked about African American music. It was a lecture, which turned out to be great, because we did it in sequence and she talked about literature and then I talked about the music and then we had examples of the music and the literature and so forth. And then there was another person who was brought in who talked about African American art. [Paul? Powell?] I think was his name; he had written a book on African American art. I think I have it back here somewhere. But it was a very interesting and exciting kind of situation.

In addition to that, because Barbara was a social person and she liked to have parties at her house. I’d gone to her house for parties, sometimes somebody’s new coming in or sometimes somebody’s going out. When Toni Morrison came to campus, Barbara was her host. Toni Morrison presented an interesting talk at Wheeler Auditorium. I remember going to that and being introduced to Toni by Barbara. I was really impressed with Toni Morrison’s work and always have been from *The Bluest Eye* and the earliest stuff and then on to *Song of Solomon*. In fact, there’s a movement of a piece of mine which I call “Solomon’s Song,” which is sort inspired by that book, this whole business about flying away to Africa.

Over the years we served on a thousand different committees. I had a PhD student, this is one of the most interesting ones, a white woman whose name was Marie Johnson. You’d think with a name like Marie Johnson, she’d be black, but she wasn’t, she was white. She also happened to be a lesbian. The reason I say that is that she walks in the room, you know she’s a lesbian, there’s just something about her. Let’s face it, in the East Bay there’s a style. She had that style.

She had this great interest in Bessie Smith, so she did her dissertation on literature—no, she was doing a kind of comparative study of women, black women, who lived in the same era, who were musicians, performers, singers and writers. She looked at Bessie Smith, and she looked at Zora Neale Hurston. In the same era, sort of iconoclastic kind of people. It was a very interesting thing and she did it from a serious musical analytical way but she also brought in the literature stuff. She had done several courses with Barbara so we both were on her dissertation committee. It turned out to be a very important dissertation. Now, it’s strange, I don’t think that that dissertation’s
ever been published but it should be. I don’t know what happened. At any rate, it was a really strong dissertation. Barbara and I worked with her on that dissertation, and with some other people, though that one sticks in my head well.

And then Barbara was active with the black faculty, we’d had lunches and I got a sense knowing her. And her daughter was around and her daughter’s father was Will, it was kind of interesting. Then of course going through her terrible illness, that was really sad. Did you ever take any classes with her or did you know her? She died last year. I went to the funeral.

Wilmot: Two thousand.

Wilson: Was it 2000? Gee, gosh, how time really flies. But she also, before she died, there was a tribute to her given over at the Morrison Room in the University Library. Somebody asked me to get some musicians and I got [BilBeld?] to get a trio of people and they played, and then people gave tributes to Barbara, former students and so forth. So that was the last time that I actually saw her prior to the funeral.

Wilmot: Do you know who organized that?

Wilson: Her students. She had legendary numbers of students who had done work with her, everywhere from undergraduate to graduate work. They got together and did it. I didn’t know them well, but you could get that from the African American Studies department because some of the people are probably still around. There were at least a couple of them who were working in the university in one capacity or another. Most of them had gone on teaching at other places or writing or doing other things.

But she was a really special person with a real sense of the role of the arts in society. She was committed to social issues. This goes over the years, the anti-apartheid struggle, you could always depend on Barbara showing up and being there and being involved in that. She was just a very positive person who was deeply committed both to social justice and to scholarship, scholarship of the highest magnitude. So she was an ideal person for that kind of position.

Wilmot: Do you remember when you went to that tribute, did you see Barbara there at that tribute?

Wilson: She was there, she was there.

Wilmot: Was she in good health at that time?

Wilson: She was not in good health. She had cancer, and the cancer had metastasized, and everybody knew she wasn’t long for this world. I think she died within
three or four months after that. I think this was in the early spring and she was
dead, probably three to six months after that she was dead. But with cancer
often you can sort of—people can get so physically tired, with the
chemotherapy and whatever else she was doing. She was there, she was
coherent, she seemed to be herself, but she was just tired. She’s really a
special person, very positive, and a person who had the kind of energy—this
is the other thing. Mary says the University killed her. Mary’s very blunt.
Mary says, “The university killed Barbara because she couldn’t stop giving.
She was giving all of her time, she was giving her students, she was giving to
this, serving committees, doing anything and everything until she didn’t have
any more energy to give.”

But she was a really extraordinary person, a brilliant person and had a great
influence on generations. Not only in the scholarly world, but in the larger
world. And in terms of individual people. She was the ideal kind of person
that you want as a colleague and want as a teacher. Because this is a person
who gives, who influences lives, but who maintains the standards of
excellence.

Wilmot: Where did she live with David? Where was their house?

Wilson: They lived in Berkeley the first time, but I can’t remember where, I mean this
was a long time ago. She and David broke up early, I mean by the end of the
seventies, he was gone, he was back in New York somewhere. She bought a
house on Benvenue and that’s where I remember her living, going to the
parties and all that stuff.

Wilmot: What was her house like?

Wilson: It was a nice house. She had a lot of artwork, she had a lot of mirrors, a lot of
books around, as you would imagine. Comfortable place. She had parties. I
remember the parties were sort of potluck parties. People would bring stuff
and cook stuff and some people would cook outside, some traditional food
and so forth. Barbara had some friends who were involved in the West Indian
community. Because you’d go to her house and you’d see people from the
West Indian community who you wouldn’t see anywhere else except for other
West Indian parties. So she kept ties somewhere with the West Indian
community.

Oh, I remember this: in the late seventies and early eighties, the black alumni
association was active and they would give awards to black faculty every
year. And the person who got the year before would be asked to present that
person, so I got the award that year and Barbara was the person the next year.
So, I remember giving the presentation for Barbara, but in order to do that I
had to go back and learn more about her than I knew. I knew her as a
colleague and so forth and as David’s wife, an active faculty member at
Berkeley, but I didn’t know anything about her background, except the details.
So in order to do that I spent some time talking to her, what do you think about this, and what about that and so on. That’s when I found out more about her family, and about how they were accomplished and how she did her PhD at Columbia and she also had a couple of sisters who were judges and this and that. She also said she had studied piano at one point, because her parents thought that she should study piano. She said, “I should play piano more,” or something like that. But she was a very good person. A tragic death, was a major loss which her department really hasn’t recovered from yet.

Wilmot: You’ve talked a lot about negotiating tenure, do you think she had a good experience vis a vis the university and the administration and other colleagues?

Wilson: I think so. She was the chair of the department, she did it all. Barbara was a very productive and solid and thorough scholar. I’m sure her tenure wasn’t a major issue at all. I’m sure she went through because the quality of her work was fine. She came in the English Department. She chose to go to the African American Studies Department. There were a couple of people who came to the African American Studies Department, and then chose to go somewhere else. Like this guy McWhorters, for example who is a real jerk, a Ward Connerly kind of guy who is going out and saying “affirmative action, we don’t need it—” that guy, and of course he gets tons of publicity.

But just the opposite of that, she came as an assistant professor in English. She had been in English departments all of her life, she came with a PhD from Columbia’s English Department, so that environment she had adjusted to— but she chose to come to the African American Studies department because she thought that the mission of that department was more consistent with what she wanted to do. And she didn’t want to deal with whatever she had to deal with in the English department, I guess.

So, she brought her FTE to the African American Studies department. And she became very active in the department, she was chair of the department for several years and tried to build the department. She was a mentor for countless numbers of students, she was active in a number of university wide programs, she was recognized for the excellence of her teaching. She won the distinguished teaching award. So her situation in the university was fine. I think like anybody in the university, any person of color in the university, there were things about the university that she probably hoped would go faster or would work better. But her personal situation in the university, I think the university was a positive kind of place for her because it was a natural environment for her. She found the place, the nook of what she wanted to do and chose to do it.

Wilmot: To take your FTE from one department to another department, is that something that’s easy to do? Cut your ties?
Wilson: No, it’s not easy to do.

Wilmot: How’d she manage that?

Wilson: Well, it’s not easy to do. But they probably had to work out some kind of compromise. Compromise in this sense: each department has so many FTE’s, so if you decide [to change] that’s fine as far as the university is concerned. But then that department says, “Wait a minute, we had ten and now we’ve got nine. So that means we don’t have that many FTE so when that person leaves or retires, is that FTE going to come back to us? And besides, we hired that person to teach in our department and now they’re teaching somewhere else.”

Probably the university worked out some kind of compromise by saying, “She can take that FTE, we want her to stay at this university, if she says, ‘I’m mad, I don’t want to stay here anymore. I’m going to leave,’ we don’t want that to happen, so what we’ll do is give you another FTE for so many years or something so that you won’t say you lost a position.”

Wilmot: So they released her? Or were they glad to see her go?

Wilson: English? I doubt if they were glad to see her go, because in the first place—

Wilmot: She was a star.

Wilson: At this point, she’s an assistant professor, she’s not a star yet, she was a potential star. But they didn’t like the idea. I’m sure they were, “Hey, we’re losing a person.” And so they weren’t very happy about that. If somebody is in one department, they want to go to another department and the other department wants them to come, the university historically has allowed that to happen and worked out the FTE thing. Usually by saying, “Okay, we’ll mortgage this for you, it will work out in the long run. If she leaves we’ll take one from them and give it back to you or whatever.” The chancellor always retains a certain amount of FTEs that he can use in circumstances like this.

Wilmot: What was her motivation in going to the African American Studies department as far as you know?

Wilson: This happened in her second year, early on, and I didn’t really know her that well then. But what happened? I think that she just felt more comfortable in the African American Studies Department, felt she could contribute more to the university. And I think she wanted to build an intellectual center in the African American Studies Department. So, I think it was logical from her point of view.

In the early years of African American studies there was this whole issue of what kind of department are you going to have? Are you going to have a department with a political thrust, or an academic thrust, or both? I think she
saw it as it ought to have a solid academic base and I think she felt she could contribute to that. Maybe she didn’t like the people in the English department, or some of the people in the English department. English departments are always massive and large, and always contentious because they are so large. And factions, maybe she didn’t want any part of that. I can’t attest to that fact.

Wilmot: I’ll have to figure that out later. My last question is: in your time that you knew her, if you ever had the opportunity to be allies around a specific issue, what kind of strategist was she? Maybe the first question is: did you have any opportunities to be allies around specific issues?

Wilson: Well, there were a whole series of issues, because she was part of the black faculty luncheon group, the caucus. We would meet and we would talk. Barbara was—I’m trying to think, I can’t think of any specific strategies. But I consider her to be a strategic thinker and there are two incidences that I remember most: one was the apartheid issue. Black faculty were mobilizing behind that and signing petitions and so on. Barbara was active in that. We had marches and this and that and there were Sproul Plaza speeches and stuff like that. So she was actively involved in that.

She also, in terms of the early years of African American studies when they were battling to try to figure out what was the nature of the department, she was fairly low profile because she was relatively new here, but I think it was pretty clear that her view was one of academic excellence. But it didn’t have to be either/or. That is, she also felt that there were important social issues that were to be addressed, and that one should address that from an academic perspective.

This didn’t mean that she supported the anti-intellectualism and that sometime existed on the part of some people who supported this, “All of this is a bunch of BS, and the real thing is literally power to the people right now and the way you do that is the barrel of a gun.” That sort of simplistic kind of understatement I think was not something that she would have supported, though she certainly would have supported doing whatever you can do, depending on the circumstances, by any means necessary, given where you are and depending on what the circumstances were. She was certainly strongly supportive of the struggle [in the big sense?].

Wilmot: I see you kind of fading so I think we should close.

[End of Interview 9]
Interview 10: June 6, 2003

Wilmot: It’s June 2\textsuperscript{nd}, Olly Wilson, interview ten. Is there anything you want to add or change from the last interview?

Wilson: I’ve forgotten most of whatever I had said. [laughter]

Wilmot: I just wanted to start off with a question that I asked you off the record last time, but I wanted to ask you on the record, which is pursuant to your role as Faculty Assistant for Affirmative Action, did you take any role in crafting affirmative action for admission policies?

Wilson: Actually, my position dealt primarily with faculty affirmative action issues and that was enough to keep me busy so I didn’t get involved in the admissions at all. During those days I didn’t get involved in admissions. Later on when I was assistant chancellor for international affairs, I also had the title of an associate dean of the graduate school. That’s because there were so many graduate students who were from, who were designated as international students, that is that they were not citizens of the United States. There were a number of issues that were particularly relevant. As associate dean I was concerned about the number of students of so-called ethnic groups who were admitted and how those numbers held up. I also was concerned about the number of international students, people coming from all over the world, how those numbers had held out and were they changing significantly. Now the demographics of that changed from time to time. For example, from the late eighties, or late seventies actually, up through 2000, the number of students from Asia really increased, but the number of Asian American students also increased, on the undergraduate level. On the graduate level, the number of students of Asian descent also increased, partially because of the opening up of China and the establishment of exchange agreements with many universities in Asia, which I was involved in. But also I think a lot had to do with the fields, particularly in mathematics and biology where there were a large number of students from Asia who were very strong students, so they were admitted to the University of California, Berkeley. So that was another issue. And then admissions, I had some concern and involvement with the programs admitting students from South Africa, particularly black and Indian students from South Africa. So we increased the number of students who were admitted. As a matter of fact, there were a couple of specific programs that were system-wide programs that we developed to bring talented black and Indian, “Colored” South African students to Berkeley because they couldn’t go to Indian universities at that time. Since that time, after the post-apartheid development, the program no longer exists because the idea is to encourage students to go to school in their own home country. So the number of students from South Africa has really dwindled. But at one point, we had, as many as ten to fifteen graduate students from South Africa who were on the Berkeley campus pursuing PhD degrees. So that was something I was directly involved in.
Wilmot: What years were you acting in that position?

Wilson: I was in that capacity from, let’s see, I think 1986 to 1990.

Wilmot: Over a few years.

Wilson: Yeah, because the struggle was going on right then.

Wilmot: That brings me to my next question. Well actually first, other than that, do you have a sense of who was active in kind of working toward affirmative action policies in admissions, undergraduate and graduate admissions? Did you have a sense of who was key in that?

Wilson: Yes. In the first place, from the chancellor on down at that time, there were public statements about support for affirmative action and the creation of aggressive affirmative action programs in the university. That proceeded from Heyman, who was chancellor then, down through everybody else. Park who was the vice chancellor supported it. So the word was out that we wanted to have an aggressive and meaningful program. It was during those years, the early part of those years, that I think the largest number of African American students and I’m sure the same thing’s true of Chicano students or Mexican American students were admitted at Berkeley. We were at percentages at that time that were up nine percent of a given admitting class. Now not all of those people came because that included a cohort students who were among the best and the brightest who were given multiple offers from the best universities, the private institutions across the country. So we were getting those kinds of people. But still the number of student enrollees was in excess of seven, eight percent, of that particular class. Those numbers have dwindled significantly, now. They’re back closer to a little bit more, but that’s after some years when the numbers were down really low after the Ward Connerly fiasco, as far as I’m concerned, and those state initiatives which made affirmative action illegal in California.

Wilmot: Can you tell me about your involvement in the anti-apartheid struggle on campus? You may need to set the scene a little for me.

Wilson: Sure. During those years as you know, South Africa was in the Newspapers every day, there was a struggle going on, very, very dramatic. The ANC was very actively involved, United Nations was involved in passing sanctions against South Africa, eventually the United States government passed sanctions against South Africa after a great deal of prodding. Pushing that, driving that were mass movements against apartheid, because the South African government had a very, very clear apartheid structure, you know. It was one of the few places in the world where it was so blatant and had been for many years, erected I guess in the fifties. So the whole apartheid notion became the law of the land. All over the world people were looking at ways of affecting meaningful intervention to attack this policy. And Berkeley people
who were concerned about this in general, professors, students, and activists in the community all saw different ways of doing this. One way the university attempted to do it was to ask the Board of Regents to divest, remember the divestment arguments? The whole notion was that there are a lot of international businesses, corporations that do big business in South Africa, because it has a great deal of resources. In the continent of Africa, it’s probably the most wealthy in terms of basic resources. And because there has traditionally been a large population there of European extract, who were settlers, not people who came and left, but people who were settlers and who were determined that they were going to live there. Then you had an infrastructure built up in South Africa that was unparalleled anywhere in the continent. And so because of that, the diamond industry for example, and many minerals and so forth that are really valuable to the world, or in South Africa, so there were a number of international corporations doing business. People felt that international cooperation and cartels were benefiting from this system because there was a major gulf—still is—from the top of the society which tended to be white European settlers or descendents of European settlers, and the blacks who were the indigenous peoples. So you had that problem which existed which you see, and classic kinds of economic disparity that you have there and so forth. So people began to address that and to attack the international corporations because there often were corporations that had large resources in the United States. So the idea was to attack them and to specifically attack the university’s Board of Regents because the Board of Regents is an agency that controls the university and literally owns the university. It’s a strange situation in California but that’s the way it is. The Board of Regents had the power to decide with whom the large sums that the university has to invest, which companies they were going to invest in. So the university activists looked around and figured out, “Okay, if they invest in certain corporations that do business in South Africa, then we should not invest in that.” The Board of Regents being conservative and not wanting to move quickly on issues like this, tended to ignore this as much as they could, but once it reached a feverpitch, than the whole idea came to divest, divest. Ultimately I think the Board of Regents did divest from some of the corporations, at least the major corporations.

Once you started doing that there’s a lot of gray areas, a lot of places that it’s not quite as simple as it appears on the face of it, but symbolically it was very important. That action, divestment, was important to take and there were a number of people who were active in that. Now, as a faculty member at the time, there were a number of meetings called, I attended some of those meetings, I participated in some of those meetings. There were a couple of news conferences I participated in, there were marches I participated in that. So the involvement was at that level. But in addition to doing that, which I think many faculty members did, because I was in this position, I was able to then think about what could and should Berkeley be doing. Of course I wasn’t alone, there were other people in the university and system wide who had these same sentiments. We developed this program—I forget the acronym for
the program—but basically the point of the program was to provide educational opportunities for South African peoples of color who could not pursue higher education in South Africa. So we developed that, raised some external money, some university money, and we were able to bring students on a system-wide basis to the universities. Most of the students who apply for this program had gone to, there was something that was called the University of South Africa. Actually the University of South Africa was the largest correspondence school in the world. It was a way of getting around apartheid. You’d have this system, and you’d take these courses by correspondence and you’d come to a central place and you would take exams and so forth. It was very successful. We had a lot of students who went to the traditional black universities and then they would take these exams and if they were successful in passing them, then they’d qualify for completing a degree from—I think it called University of South Africa, but it was really just a large correspondence school. There major universities of South Africa, like Wits[watersrand] and there were two or three others that were traditionally the bailiwicks of the elite Afrikaans. Those universities didn’t admit blacks, but some of the other universities, the University of Cape Town, which was a more integrated area anyway, there were a lot of coloreds, mixed there. You know in South Africa they have this three-tiered system: whites, coloreds, and blacks, and Indians—the Indians were sort of like the coloreds. Cape Town had a large number of Coloreds, so that university tended to be a little more integrated. There were other universities that were traditionally black universities, so you had all of those graduates competing to try to come to the university, to participate in this program. People were reviewed and best were selected, the best as far as we could determine. They would be given funds to travel to America to pursue a higher education degree in the University of California system.

Wilmot: Where did you get funds for this or where did you fundraise for this program?

Wilson: This was system-wide, so most of the funds came from major corporations, some of whom had done business in South Africa and said, “Look, we’re willing to give back. We’re in business but we understand that its complicated. We still want to make the money, but if we can give to something to protect our image, fine.” So this was major. And it was primarily systemwide. Actually, the person who really was the point person on that was a professor who I think was originally from—I don’t know where he was originally from—but his name was John Marcum [spells it]. John Marcum. As a matter of fact, John, after that became director of the EOP [Educational Opportunity Program] after that. He might still be there for all I know. He was a political scientist and I think South Africa was one of his interests. He was also interested in education abroad. As a matter of fact, I got involved in this initially because of my interest in education abroad. I might have told you, I got my family to be able to go to Africa the first time by agreeing to become director of a program.
My granddaughter comes here and she really loves Bambi, and whenever she sees the deer she says, “That’s Bambi! That’s Bambi!” There’s so many deer out here I say to her, “Taylor, there’s deer out there” and she says “Oh, there’s Bambi!” And the deer, who have no fear of humans, just stand and look at her and she looks, “It’s Bambi!” She sits here.

Wilmot: She thinks this is the place where the Bambis live.

Wilson: That’s right because there’s a canyon right behind it and it is a place where the deer live.

Anyway that’s how the funds came here for that program. And it was a very successful program. As a matter of fact, I’ve received letters from many of the students that we had inviting me to come to South Africa. I was supposed to go to South Africa when we were doing this—this was in the middle of the anti-apartheid stuff—and they wouldn’t give me a visa. So I wasn’t able to go, then. After everything was over I could’ve gone but something always came up so I haven’t been able to go. Now it’s getting prohibitively expensive and so forth and I’ve got all these other agendas so I don’t. I still want to go to South Africa, though.

Wilmot: Who else was involved in the—do you remember talking about the anti-apartheid struggle with other professors?

Wilson: Oh, yeah. There were a lot of people. Well I mentioned Barbara Christian was involved, Bill Lester was involved—he’s a very close personal friend of ours, he was involved. Harry Morrison was involved. I think most of the African American faculty of my generation who was still here—Jewelle Gibbs—were all involved in that. The person who was probably most involved, because I think he took it as a career kind of thing and really got involved, was Ken Simmons. Ken was a professor of architecture. In the field of architecture, a lot of the professors there are independent business people that have their own architectural firms. They are doing business and they also have an appointment at the university. That’s kind of the way that architecture ran at a certain point—not everybody, but a lot of the people. Because they wanted practitioners to be professors there. Ken had a firm, but Ken was also a bit of a politician as you may or may not know. He was on the East Bay MUD [Municipal Utility Water District], he was on that kind of stuff. Ken had one half foot in the University and one half foot out in the community. Ken got very much involved in that. We all spent time in it, but I think Ken spent more time than most of us did. And so he was often the spokesperson when this kind of thing happened. As a matter of fact, Ken ultimately left the university and moved to South Africa. In fact he’s teaching in South Africa. Ken is at least five to ten years older than me, so I know that he’s past retirement age. But he’s teaching in South Africa, I got an e-mail from him not too long ago. He’s still living there and working there. I’m sure he’s participating in the
struggle, whatever the struggle is there, from that perspective. Those were the people who were involved at that time.

Wilmot: Was this kind of a movement that had cross—did it multi-racial communities?

Wilson: Oh, yeah! There were a number of people. I just got an e-mail from Leo Woolsey, who was a professor of engineering, who was very much involved in it. Troy Duster was involved in it. I’m just mentioning the African American people. There were many people who were not African Americans, because African Americans, as you know, are just a handful of faculty. I would say that hundreds of faculty in general who shared the same sentiment and participated in the marches and everything else. And often these people were people who over the years you sort of identified as traditional activists or liberal leaning people, or people on an issue having to do with civil rights or having to do with protection of first amendment rights were always there. So you had a significant coalition of those people and there were many of them, many of them who were participating in that. Those were many of the people that were participating and still participate on various—for example, in the anti-war movement, there were a couple of marches that I participated in, and you see some of the same people after a while. I guess it depends on how fine you draw the line. If it’s some general issue that has to do with I guess with what one might refer to as a liberal position, most of these people I would share that depending on what the issues was. There are other people who, depending on how one chooses to attack that issue would draw the line or not draw the line. You know, if you’re going to break some windows, some people say, “Hell, break some windows.” Some people would do it, other people wouldn’t do it. The anarchist stream is something that is always there, but it’s something that I don’t support and that’s where they lose me. Somebody’s going to attack somebody else’s freedom or right or prerogatives, then that’s where it loses me. Unless it has to do with protesting an egregious evil. For example, like segregation. If sitting in, which just makes people uncomfortable, that’s something that I felt was unimportant. So that was something. On the other hand, if you’re just going to elevate, take the struggle to another level and make everybody uncomfortable because you’re uncomfortable in general, and it’s not pointed around some specific thing, I have difficulty with that. So it’s these thin lines and it depends on which issue, so.

Wilmot: What are you politically mobilized around right now?

Wilson: Oh, right now! Well, in the first place I was never a supporter—well, first, I’m not a supporter of George Bush, and I certainly was not a supporter of this recent war in Iraq. I thought that was silly. I think there was no question about who was going to quote “win the war,” because the massive power of the aggregated forces of the United States is tremendous, compared with anybody, and especially with a country less than the size of California that’s been under sanctions for ten years. Gee, I mean, is anybody surprised that in that period—
as a matter of fact, if it lasted two days or a week I wouldn’t have been surprised. Still doesn’t make it right. I think the principle of sovereignty is important. I think for a nation to unilaterally say that we’re going to unilaterally attack that country because we don’t like what they’re doing and to totally ignore the United Nations is very dangerous. Because the United Nations existed as an international cooperative to try and address things that are threats to world peace and world success and the betterment of the equality of living in the world in general. For Bush to come in, a president who was elected on a very thin line, to say, “No, we’ve got to do it, we’ve got to do it to protect the world” in spite of the fact that the world said, “We don’t need your protection.” Granted, Saddam I have no great love for Hussein. I believe that the evidence is pretty clear before and after that this guy was a real monster, in terms of human rights and so forth. But I don’t think that was the way to do it. I would have liked to see the entire United Nations decide they’re going to do it, not the United States unilaterally doing it. Because if the United States can do it, then anybody else can do it.

To say, “The hell with you, we’re going to do it ourselves.” I think that sets a bad precedent and I think also it’s inconsistent. Look, you’ve got North Korea that really does have weapons of mass destruction. We still haven’t had any evidence that there are any weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. It was simply, from my perspective, from my belief—I don’t know this to be true—I believe that George Bush wanted to avenge what he thought was his father’s failure. Once he got into the presidency he wanted really strongly to affect policy in that area. But this is a guy who is sometimes touted in the press with having great resolve, but he obviously didn’t have great resolve when he had an opportunity to risk his life. During the Vietnam War, he didn’t volunteer. He could have volunteered; his father at least volunteered and suffered as a military person. He was almost killed, you know? But George W. didn’t do any of that, and so now he’s a great warrior and this nincompoop idea of landing on the helicopter [aircraft carrier; U.S.S. Abraham] with his military garb on like he was a great conquering hero, a guy who never participated in any of that stuff, strikes me as being the height of hypocrisy.

Wilmot: Was this in the news the past couple of days?

Wilson: This was about a month ago, shortly after the war was over, when he flew with some jet pilot, and landed on a submarine and he was in military garb and he jumped out of the plane and all the troops were cheering. Well, the troops are cheering because he’s the commander in chief. Somebody’s got to be the commander in chief. The president of the United States is the commander in chief. So he’s donning his warrior clothes. And it’s really hypocrisy because this is not a warrior. This is a person who happens to be the president of the United States by a thin margin, but he’s still the president of the United States. So I have some real problems with that, and I have real problems with his policies in general. The major policy is his policy on affirmative action, his policies on domestic issues in general, his tax cut,
which, again consistently awards upper tax brackets. At least he’s blatant about, he’s very blatant about it. I think he’s using war as an excuse for everything. I don’t know if you read the comic strip. Did you see Doonesbury comic strip this week?

Wilmot: No.

Wilson: There was an interesting comic strip. Doonesbury has some interesting insights. He said that Ari Fleischer, the presidential spokesman who is leaving soon, thank goodness, had told the press—this is cartoon, not reality, though it’s a pun on reality—that any answer to any question is going to be 9/11. So you ask any question, 9/11 will be the answer. “Why did you do this?” 9/11 is the answer. “Why’d you do that?” 9/11 is the answer. “Why are our civil liberties being eroded?” 9/11. Anything! 9/11. Because they’ve discovered that the American populace is scared and will accede to anything if you say 9/11. So that’s it. The answer to everything: 9/11. “Why’d you give this tax cut?” 9/11. Nine-eleven is the Holy Grail, and so that’s—I’m concerned about issues like that.

Wilmot: On a local level, were you and your wife ever involved in the school board in Berkeley? You’re still in Berkeley, right?

Wilson: Years ago, years ago. I’ve never run for any city government, you know, but I have had friends and associates who have run from time to time. I remember, you mentioned the school board, there was a person I knew who was the father of a friend of my daughters, and her name was Williams, Robin Williams. Robin was a good friend of my daughter, Dawn. Robin’s father, Carol Williams, was an African American guy who had worked in forestry and I guess he had studied forestry seriously and done a PhD or something at Yale and he was living here and he ran for the school board. When he ran for the school board, he asked—you know we were friendly with them, he and his wife, Marquita—and he asked me to help him with his campaign. So I remember going around with him and going to coffee clutches and whatever people do on a local level and working for Carol Williams. Carol was elected and served on the school board for a long time. Since that time, we haven’t been as close, we’re still friendly. He eventually came to the University as a professor in forestry. We haven’t been really that close. He and his wife got a divorce about ten years ago, I guess at least that long. And then she married somebody else who I guess was a friend of ours so we happened to know her. Her daughter is still a good friend of my daughter. They all lived there and their husbands live in LA. That involvement with Carol was the closest thing I got involved in in Berkeley politics. I’ve voted consistently, I know who I like and who I don’t like and so forth, but Berkeley politics, in terms of any personal involvement, that was the closest thing that I had.

Wilmot: I have another question I wanted to return to. Actually I think I’m going to go here first: This is all the way back to the Black studies department at Berkeley
in the early seventies. I know you were outside of that, you were in the music department, but maybe sometimes you talked to people before they came to campus to say, “this is the kind of environment this is,” for potential hires, but how did you kind of watch that unfold or how involved were you in thinking about the black studies department?

Wilson: I was peripheral to the Black studies department, and that was by conscious choice. When I came to Berkeley I was invited out by the music department, I was interested in the music department. I had talked to the music department at Oberlin. But I had been a faculty member that as I told you had helped to organize the African American studies program at Oberlin. So African American Studies, ideally, it seemed to be something that was important, something that should be done, and because I was interested in African American music, which is the core to any study of African American culture, it seemed a natural that there was some kind of relationship. So when I came out, I asked people about what’s going on in African American studies. Well the context I came out in was 1969.

1969, the Third World Strike was going on. That was a strike to try to ensure that there was a Third World College. It was a very difficult struggle, not only in terms of the people who wanted to establish African American Studies in some form, or a Third World College in some form. The basic thrust was: Look, in this institution, the canon, as we have found it, consists primarily of European Studies, studies perceived from a European perspective. There are a number of other perspectives in the world that are serious and one should look at it seriously. That’s not being done and hasn’t been done historically here and therefore, we felt that there ought to be some other mechanism that starts out with a different set of assumptions. So, they, the architects of this view, are the people who happened to push that particular view that said, “We ought to have a Third World College, that’s the way to do it.” So the Third World College became symbolic for this larger issue which is inclusiveness in terms of studies of the cultures and the realities and the ideas from people all over the world. But it was played out—and sometimes when things are played out in a certain way, it becomes rigid, it gets objectified. So everybody was thinking Third World College instead of the larger issue. But that’s the way all struggles to try to force change to occur.

At any of rate, that happened. In the context of that, it became very complicated because every time there’s an action there’s a reaction. And some people were saying, “These people are crazy, they’re just trying to pull up the University. What they really want is propaganda studies or feel-good studies and we are the protectors of high culture and that should be maintained at the University.” So the battle was joined between those protectors of European values, coded as Western civilization values, and the hordes that are clambering at the door under the guise of Third World Colleges. [chuckles] So that was drawn that way and so it was a real battle royal. Politically, people
were taking positions all the way from complete support to complete antagonism.

When I came here, all that was going on and it also existed on another more basic level. That is within, for example, not to even consider Asian American Studies or Chicano-American Studies, but to simply look at the African American position. There were a number of different approaches within that, and that ranged from everything to the Black Muslims, the Black Panthers, the Republic of New Africa, US. There were two or three quote “revolutionary” groups or quasi-revolutionary groups who had different philosophical underpinnings and approaches. So all this was going on and they were battling against each other. The battling was not only verbal but sometimes it would evolve into actual physical attacks on one another, so that was all going on in this time. Then, those struggles that existed outside of the institution were being brought into the institution because the institution was dealing with that issue. So many people said if we can control this ideal within the University, then this will be a satellite of our overall gauge. So you had different ambitions about making African American Studies part of the community. And ideally, that phrase “part of the community” was important, because people wanted to do something that was relevant to the community. On the other hand what did that mean? The meaning of that was really complicated, because some people thought literally that the people in the community would determine what’s taught in the University and could say, “Okay, we’ll set up a committee of whoever was there and say we should teach X rather than teach Y.” Then you had that all the way to other things: “No, this particular group,”—whether it was the Black Panthers or it was the Black Muslims or any of the other larger groups—“is part of our overall education program, so that will be our education program in the University.” At the same time you had people who were in the university who said, “That’s crazy! None of that will ever happen!” So you had all of this going on.

What I saw was a mess. And I said, “Look, from my perspective, I’m coming to the University of California, I’m an academic, I understand what that means, I understand both the advantages and the limitations of that. I know from my perspective that that’s going to be an ever ongoing battle and I’m a finite person, I live only a certain period of time, I better maximize what I can do. That would be best served in the music department.” And I was given the offer from the music department anyway. So I came to the music department and I was only exploring the degree to which I was going to be affiliated with African American Studies. Finding out that the African American Studies as it was then constituted didn’t quite know what it wanted to do and people were battling each other—and at that time, during the third world strike, classes weren’t held on campus, they were held in town and so forth, in churches and schools and whatever, trying to boycott the [campus?]—I said this doesn’t make sense at this point for me. I’ll watch it, I’ll be an observer. When it gets straightened out, and eventually I knew it would, then I’ll become an affiliate faculty member. You can do that with any department if the department
agrees and you agree. So that’s what happened. I almost thought of that woman who I talked to. Her name was Sarah somebody. I mentioned this to you before. She was a poet. She’s long since been dead. But she was a writer and she had that very sane sense about this whole thing going on and the struggle. She was in the African American Studies department. And she talked about the craziness that was going on and the factionalism and how from her perspective thought some of it was necessary, it was overblown and there were a lot of egos involved. Anyway, to make a long story short—

Wilmot: Sarah Fabio?

Wilson: Sarah Fabio. Yeah, good! That’s it. Did you remember her or did you look back at the—?

Wilmot: No, actually I’ve heard of her in a different context, the context of Merritt College.

Wilson: She probably was over there at one point.

Wilmot: I didn’t realize that she was doing both.

Wilson: Yes. She was at Berkeley and she was a poet. She was an older woman. But very well centered, I mean, she knew what she wanted to do. She was dedicated to quote “the struggle” and all of that, but she also had common sense. [laughter] She said, “Hey, this is a bunch of crap that’s going on here.” I had met her—she had come through as a poet or something in Oberlin when I was back there, so I remember talking to her and talking to Troy Duster and talking to a couple of other people when I came out in ’69 to look at the University. To make a long story short I was offered the position, I came and I taught in the position. What actually happened to the African American Studies program as you probably know, is that there were a number of different factions and in some instances, some of the faculty were still working on their degrees, some of the younger faculty were working on their degrees. It was complicated. So over a period of time there were a core group of people who came in hired, full time people, who already had their degree from somewhere else and they began to shape things. Eventually Bil Banks became chair of the department. And Bil’s position was that this ought to be an institution that focuses within an academic setting. And there are limitations in an academic setting. There are great things you can do and there are a lot of things you can’t do. Bil was supported strongly by the administration and Bill had the courage to stand up and say, “This is what I think the department ought to do.” It was at a tough personal price because he was threatened and all kind of stuff. He ultimately prevailed. Of course the whole dynamics of the situation changed. The Black Panther Party gets weakened, Black Muslims Party sort of splits, the other people who were here who were participants, the Republic of New Africa. You say, “Republic of
New Africa,” most people don’t even know what it is. US, most people remember Ron Karenga—what’s the Christmas celebration?

Wilmot: Kwanzaa.

Wilson: Kwanzaa, yes. Things have shifted and changed. A lot of that is because of the CIA or the FBI infiltration of the Black Panthers, discrediting them and so forth, the COINTELPRO [Counter Intelligence Program] program or whatever they called it. A lot of it also was the changing of time, the shifting of the dynamics, and the fact that in some instances, some of these groups got too far out and internecine warfare was getting bad, too. All of that happened so it sort of ended in kind of a royal confusion. Out of that came some logical things that were there the whole time.

Wilmot: From that peripheral place, did you see when the split between Black studies and the Ethnic studies program occurred? Did you witness that from the periphery?

Wilson: What happened was there was a College—remember I said that the whole epitome of this issue of inclusion was articulated in the notion of a Third World College. But the Third World had different agendas because of who they were, why they were, and what they should be.

Wilmot: Than Black Studies?

Wilson: Than Black—I mean Black Studies, African American Studies, Chicano Studies, there’s a different agenda, Asian Studies had a different agenda, and Native American studies had a different agenda. Each group coming at it from their perspective was in a different state. For example, African American Studies at the time actually had more faculty members that they could find. They could actually find faculty members who had the basic qualifications to be university professors—PhD degrees, some experience, some kind of exposure, extended exposure to the African American world. Certainly Asian Americans had that same issue, but Asian American issues, the Asian society was always different depending on which Asian society we’re talking about, because there are so many of them, and in California there’s so many different societies and they each had their different perspective. Filipinos, when you lump with Cambodians, with Hawaiians, with Samoans, with Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans. That’s like the United Nations, you know. So, it depended on which group was being represented. Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans have been here as long as California. Certainly Chinese Americans, Japanese too. But some Japanese and some Chinese in certain areas, certain fields, already very much involved in the university. But it’s usually very rarefied, certain fields, in math, in engineering, in some fields there were eminent professors of Chinese and Japanese background, who had been in the University for years. From their perspective it was a very different thing. They might have shared some of the perspective, but they had made the
leap, individuals had, but as a group on the other hand, you take all the Chinese who got off the boat last week—totally different point of view as opposed to people who have been here a hundred years. So there are different views within one specific group.

If you look at the Chicano Americans, with this burgeoning population, people coming across the border, the conflict, the language, everything. A very different set of concerns. So for them to have enough people who they could actually recruit who would come to teach in a field like that with the basic requirements of the university it was tougher. So they were still looking at alternative viewpoints where the African Americans were saying no that’s not an issue, we know we can make this the place for people to come who are interested in African American Studies or any field. So it was different. And that was one of the reasons why African American Studies decided “Okay, we better be part of the overall structure. So we don’t care about being part of something called a Third World College, because we see the Third World College having disparate points of view that we’d be endlessly arguing about. Whereas if we say we’re going to be the African American Studies Department, we’re going to study African American Studies just as we do in Latin American Studies—not Latin Americans, that’s the wrong one, because Latin American was studied in a different way from Chicano American Studies. If you take a look at East Asian Studies or Middle Eastern Studies—that model, we can work with that model. African American studies, we’ll do that in a scholarly way and so forth and so on, we’ll give degrees and so on.

We’ll have a community component. But the idea of having a community component which runs the department is a little bit different. So whereas Chicano, Native American, Asian American less so, was still dealing with a different model, “Let’s reinterpret the whole nature of the university.” That’s why the African American Studies Department said, “Okay, in order to be accepted in this University, in order to get the kinds of things, what we have to do is to become part of the University, to try to redefine it, but redefine it from within, as opposed to being—.” Because part of the notion was look, if you created a new entity overnight, you can destroy a new entity overnight [snaps fingers to illustrate], whereas if you’re part of the fabric, to destroy anything department threatens the life of all of the departments. So that was part of the belief. Yeah, I saw all of that happening, and maybe at some point I may have been asked to help advise on one issue or another, but for the most part I was peripheral to it.

Wilmot: Who would have asked you to advise?

Wilson: I could have been asked advised by—and there were times, now that I think about it, that I was asked both by the department and by the administration. One would say, “We’re reviewing this proposal of this group to become part of that. We’ve asked a group of professors to participate, will you?” Yeah, you know, stuff like that. I’m sure there were times.
Wilmot: It sounds like two things. It sounds like on one hand, the Black Studies Department made a survival move, and it also sounds like the Black Studies department took a more conservative stance than Ethnic studies.

Wilson: I think that that’s true, I think it’s true. I don’t think that the people doing it would necessarily consider it a conservative stance. I don’t think it was motivated primarily from survival, I just described it in survivalist terms. I think it was motivated from an ideological position of what happens within the university. In the University, I think part of the problem with some of the activism of that period was that some of the people leading the activists didn’t have the foggiest idea of what a university did and what a university didn’t do. I firmly view the university as extremely important, as molders of opinion, molders of ideas. I think the transfer of ideas that goes on at the University that ultimately impact on the general economy is tremendous. But, it functions, to use another time I like to use, as the medieval guild of thing. So you have that medieval guild, but the spin-offs of that, not all of them, but the spin-offs of that are very powerful in shaping attitudes of the time. So, on the other hand there’s another view of knowledge which says from political ideology, “Hey, knowledge is in the service of our goals, and our goals are to liberate the people.” So if you are a person, depending on what you do, that ought to be subsumed under the overall goal. Now I have some problems with that. Because I believe that ideas, individuals—and this is the Western part of me, I clearly have bought this hook, line, and sinker—and that is that ideas are important, we never know where they are coming from, and you should have great respect for them. And you shouldn’t be forced to control those ideas to serve some political purpose. I think that’s where you get some of the worst abuses of tyranny, you know. And while I understand that there’s got to be a counterbalance to this, that ideas themselves floating around this universe by themselves have meaning when they are made political reality, so the politics is really important. So you’ve got to go from the concept to something that will implement that concept if the concept has—or test that concept to see if it had validity in changing the quality of life or understanding of life. But you can’t proscribe what you think and how you think it? And I think that’s where we get into problems when we try to do that.

So you’ve got to have some place where people can sort of think and try to do what they do. Then in the market place of ideas, people choose. One political government chooses this, another political government chooses that. People vote, democracy tries to do its thing and you constantly have this battle between the proscribed and the ideal. I was reading a book recently about the American Revolution and about how the dynamics between Thomas Jefferson’s ideals on one side and people like Alexander Hamilton’s ideas on the other side represented diametric opposition. On the one hand, Hamilton was saying, “This is the way we ought to do it, and we have to watch out for this and we have to control what we do.” Jefferson was saying, “Let’s be open and free.” Now Jefferson and Hamilton, both of them had contradictions, deep contradictions. [chuckles] But still the idea, the idea that he had was really
interesting. When you think the framer of the first ten amendments and the Declaration of Independence had slaves that he never did free and was a progenitor of a whole generation who he denied, at least denied by giving them freedom. So it took DNA two hundred years later to say, “Look, these people aren’t lying,” so that it really speaks very, very powerfully on a microcosm to the reality of America. The contradiction, the built-in contradiction of this country is so heavy that you think about it on so many levels that until we’re able to face that realistically, we’re still always going to have problems. So anyway, that’s sort of a tangent.

Wilmot: Okay, I think I got your main idea about the University being a place that should remain kind of committed to the pursuit and development of ideas.

Wilson: As much as you can, because I know that that’s an ideal that you can never realize truly completely but you can try. That’s why I support tenure. Every now and then people say, “Oh, there shouldn’t be any tenure.” I believe tenure is really important. I know tenure is important because if you didn’t have tenure and it was a vertical hierarchical structure, whoever happened to be president or governor could say, “Fire that guy, fire that nut! Let’s get rid of the Angela Davises, and the Herbert Marcuses of the world.” And they tried.

Wilmot: That’s interesting that you say that because that brings me to this other question which I started to ask you last time off tape. I told you I had been reading this book about how pervasive third world Marxism was in the 1970’s, which I didn’t really realize until I read this book, even though you’d think I would kind of know this, it’s really recent history. Americans kind of have an interesting blind spot for recent American history. So I wanted to ask you, I understand that—the early ‘70s was this time of momentous upheaval, re-examining social commitments and structures. Is there any way that all of that carried over into composing? Did that ever affect the way people decided to approach music? Was there ever a Marxist—you know?

Wilson: Well, let me back up and put it this way. I think that it’s complicated to sort of look at the dynamics of social change and its reflection in music. I think it’s a very complicated issue and it can be a trap, intellectually, and let me explain what I mean. If you look at the history of music—and let’s just talk about Western music and then we’ll talk about African American music—think about the history of Western music and you think about all the things that are going on in Europe at the time, you know plagues, wars, crises, and so forth. Think about the music: often the music didn’t parallel that which is going on. Times when things are terrible, and people are killing each other left and right, and countries are being invaded, and the French Revolution, and then the end of the French Revolution when the Reign of Terror was going on, Robespierre, and people are getting “Off with their heads!” of anybody, a champion today and then you’re an enemy of the Republic the next day. All of that terrible stuff that happens when you break down the order, whatever the
order is. You break down the feudalistic order and then you have democracy, but democracy is the committees of independence or whatever it is you are calling themselves so it became committees of terror. So they’d say, “You’re the bad guy, you’re the bad guy.” Now, in spite of all of that, at that very same time, you have some extraordinary music being written that seems totally independent of that. You think about Beethoven, Beethoven’s third symphony was called the *Heroica*. Beethoven was a German, and he’s writing this music and he’s writing it because he thought Napoleon was this great guy. But then Napoleon starts messing up Germany and Russia and everything, so Beethoven says to hell with that and scratches Napoleon’s name out and still writes the orchestra. Really a cataclysmic time for somebody living in Germany when Napoleon is running over and beating up everybody. [laughter] Now you’ve got me started. The history of the world is often based on the history of thugs: who’s the biggest and the baddest, who can kick anybody else’s butt? That’s what it is about. Feudalism. Just like we know, in any neighborhood, there’s some guys over there you don’t trust who are thugs, just thugs. They’ll beat up anybody, they’ll shoot anybody, they’ll kill anybody. If these guys take over, that’s the way they run the world. But if that’s what the order is, if they’re so big and bad, they can make everybody else follow them. Because people figure, “If you don’t follow me, I’m going to come back and get you. So you better pledge fealty, pledge loyalty to me because I need you now, because I’m fighting this other thug across the street. So you’ve got to help me. If you don’t help me I’ll come back and kill you, chop off your head.” So that’s why with the sword they say “Pledge loyalty to me and I’ll make you a knight.” It’s a history of thugs, that that European notion.

That European notion is the same in many parts of the world. It’s the way it was in Africa. You had these groups, these tribes, whatever. This guy, the Ghanaians have the whole history of golden stool—did we ever talk about that? Same thing, military confederation. The myth of the golden stool was that Ose Tutu, who was the first chief of the Ghanaians, sort of created this myth—like any myth, you either believe it or you don’t believe it. The deities willed that he should be the controller. To symbolize this, a golden stool descended from heaven, like that stool right in there [points] but its golden. It had certain designs on it which said this is the stool of the emperor and this guy, then he got everybody else because he was bigger and stronger than them or had bigger and stronger troops. And they followed him. He said, “You’re going to take the left side, you’re going to take the right side and this is the way we’re going to attack people.” So they conquered all of then-Ghana, most of what was Ivory Coast, and much of what was Togo, the country to the east, west, and north. He conquered most of that area and became the king and ruled for years and years. He brought a Pax Romana, Pax Ghanaia to Ghana under this thing, until the British came. The British came with superior weapons and ultimately they couldn’t completely subdue the entire nation, but they managed to capture the then Assanahini who was the descendant of Ose Tutu. So then they were the big bad guys until they were kicked out. So you
have this whole history of bad guys beating up on bad guys through most nation’s history, that’s really what it’s about from my perspective

Wilmot: So let’s stop for one second.

[interview interruption, change disks]

Wilmot: So you were saying?

Wilson: I was saying that the thrust of this sort of, this tangent that I went on, really had to do with a response to the question about Marxism and music, or any political ideal and music. And I was saying that one has to be careful because I think music sometimes does follow what is a general social change, ideology in the air, and sometimes it’s independent of that. Because music is also a reflection of individual human sympathies and sensitivities and sometimes it’s counter to what’s going on in the world at that time. But ideas do influence artistic ideas, so if you take the idea of Marxism, which deals with the economic political reality, there are spin-offs from that directly. If you look at it as it manifests itself in Russia, the largest, certainly quasi-Marxist society that existed, because people felt that we have to have control, central control, music was seen as important and so the government decided that you ought to have certain kinds of music, and certain kinds of music ought not to have. So there you have a history of Russia for fifty to seventy five years, where the government literally proscribed what would happen musically. Because it was felt this is not in the social best interest, “This is irrelevant because we are involved in this great leap forward in terms of cultural equanimity, and this music is not in the service so you shouldn’t do that music. You should write political music, music that glorifies the past, music that glorifies the working man, music that glorifies the proletariat. The lumpen proletariat, the better.” That was really trying. That’s why you certain composers stopped writing a certain kind of music and started a certain kind of music, “Don’t write this abstract music that nobody can understand, but write music that everybody can understand. So that it’s clear and in the service of Marxist, Socialist people believe.” That’s one manifestation, that’s the obvious manifestation, and you have the obvious excesses, you know, the control thing I was talking about earlier. On the other hand, in the United States, you certainly don’t have that. People who held literal Marxist views in that sense, thought about that. As a matter of fact, the irony is that sometimes a person like Paul Robeson is identified with that because Robeson is associated with the Marxist movement, and is associated with the Communist movement and so forth, and is associated with folk music, you know, glorification of folk music. The whole folk music movement, revitalization in the thirties and forties, really comes from—it’s sort of a spin-off of that ideology. But it’s also independent of that. Because on one hand folk music does that, but folk music also glorifies the individual. So you have this irony: on one hand, the ideal of the collective and the reality of the individual as a folk singer. Even though the folk is supposedly dealing with the folk, an individual’s interpretation of that
is that individual’s interpretation of that. So you have this dichotomy between some distant ideal and some individual’s perspective of it.

Now, in terms of contemporary music in America over the last century, once you begin to challenge the canon, the whole cultural Darwinistic notion that music is a straight line just as evolution is a straight line, survival of the fittest and all that, which people really thought late 19th century by the time Darwin’s ideas and [Aldous] Huxley’s ideas becomes established, by the end of the 19th, the early 20th century, most people sort of believed that. And believed it in terms of music. People would think about the roots of music, but that meant European music, but that meant the evolution and the dominance of the German end in the production of music. If you look at Bach, Beethoven, Mozart, Brahms, Wagner, they’re all German. They all come from central Europe and they’re all like that. So, if that’s your view of music, and you’re thinking about it as a progressive kind of thing, each kind of person builds on that line, you can make that: if you start with Wagner, come up a straight line and end with Wagner. And Wagner, it’s kind of crazy with people like Stravinsky, but he’s not German anyway, so that you start getting this other stream. If you look at that from that point of view things get a little strange. If you look at it from other points of view, of people looking at their own culture and looking at folk music and saying how is our folk reality different from your folk reality and let us praise our own folk reality, which happened to have exploded at the end of the 19th century. At the same time this was exploding in the 19th century, people begin to look very carefully, “What about all the music in the rest of the world?” The people who went to Indonesia and the people who went to Africa, and the people who went to South America said “Oh! There’s all this other stuff going on! What about this stuff? Let’s study this stuff, too.” So then you get people looking at that and trying to figure out what that is, and how it works, and so forth. So that’s all going on one end.

Once you start looking at some of these other cultures, people say maybe it’s not that straight cultural Darwinism line that they talked about. Maybe there are a lot of these going on at the same time. Maybe there is no one line. So then let’s look at this. In the beginning of the 20th century, you get people beginning to look at music in a number of different ways, and valuing and privileging a number of different kinds of things, and therein lies, perhaps what you might think of as a reaction to socialism. You might think of all the many currents of music that have developed in the 20th century as being a response to that. So that to what extent is Marxism as a concept responsible for the multiplicity of ideas and ways of approaching and the privileging of folk culture on one hand, which is very Marxist, but only in the service of the proletariat ideal. If you look at the proletariat and you start valuing the individual in that and you say, “That’s not proletariat, that’s not Marxism in the collective sense, that’s something else. That’s the humanist sense.” So you have the humanist ideal coming in and dealing with the breakdown of the other system and you have a wide range of things. So what we think of as
contemporary music certainly explodes in the 20th century, because once you say it doesn’t have to be this way, then it can be any way. [laughter] Then people start doing a lot of things and looking at a lot of different sources. And people start talking about the individual vision or the individual voice, the individual communicative powers of a particular composer or a group of people or whatever. When you have that in the face of the tremendous growth of popular music, and music that’s neither popular nor classical, but in between or are classical in a different way—things like jazz. So you have all of that going on which sort of changes the entire paradigm. That’s a long answer, but it does try to speak some of the issues you raised.

Wilmot: Do you remember the music department in Berkeley being altered by an influx of—?

Wilson: I think the music department is like every music department: as ideas change, so do the people change, so do the attitudes change, so do the students, the faculty, the whole thing. Any creative department, as styles and values change within the department, different concepts about what we’re doing and why and how. This is another vestige of what I said about the impact of ideas. If somebody says “Look, what we’re doing is really irrelevant. There’s something else out there more important.” Then people are going to think about it—they might not agree with it, but they’re going to think about it. If people think about it enough, then people will say, “Maybe we are irrelevant.” Or if some composer comes along and says, “Well the way they used to do it was fine, but I’ve got a better way.” People listen to that and say, “Is it better?” Not better, not worse, it’s just different. All of those things are constantly going on.

Wilmot: I want to think about what I heard you say in response to my question. Because what I thought I heard you say is that on one hand a cautioning against the dangers of any kind of creativity that suddenly exists to serve a political ideal. The second thing I heard you say is that, in fact, there was a broad shift in ideas in the world that changed the way that music was thought about and the places where it really drew from in the 20th century.

Wilson: Exactly. That’s what I said.

Wilmot: Okay, good. [laughter]

[interview interruption]

Wilmot: Are there any individuals that you can think of exemplify this idea in the seventies, who took their composing leads from a political framework?

Wilson: You can answer that in a lot of ways. There were certainly a lot of composers, actually more in the sixties than in the seventies, who were concerned about political realities—certainly the Vietnam War, certainly civil rights struggle
became an obvious part of their musical ideas—a whole generation of composers. Looking at it from a worldwide point of view, some composers in certain places, to follow up one extreme, certainly Shostakovich was a composer working in Russia at the time, whose artistic direction was clearly dictated by the direction of the government. So he stopped writing one kind of music and started writing another kind of music. But that was early on, we’re talking about the thirties, forties, fifties in direct response to the political realities of Soviet Russia. In this country, in the period between the sixties and the seventies, a lot of composers who wrote pieces that reflected the reality of the political situation, the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights struggle—some of the composers who did that, one that just popped in my mind because you asked that question, was a composer who was an American composer by the name of Salvatore Mariano. He’s dead now, but he taught at the University of Illinois, I met him at the University of Illinois. He wrote a piece called L’s G.A., and it was supposedly Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, but it was a multidimensional artistic work involving film and dance and music and electronic music and so forth. It brought together sort of the day, the then cutting edge ideas, plus the theater in a parody and a satire on the ideologies that supported the Vietnam War. So it was a thirty, forty minute piece which went on and there was somebody in a gas mask and there was singing and music and film was being projected as a multimedia kind of expression. It was sort of an extravaganza that way. Now there are a number of different pieces written by composers of that generation all the time. There were also pieces that were written in direct response to specific events. For example, I wrote a piece called In Memoriam of Martin Luther King, 1968, assassination of Martin Luther King. And many other composers wrote pieces in memoriam Martin Luther King or in memoriam JFK. That was kind of a thing, something would happen and people would memorialize it in music by using techniques that they thought were appropriate for that particular piece. So you have a whole range of music written by composers from all over the place that reflect those kinds of things. For example, one of the most famous pieces because of the musical techniques was written by [William] Pinderetzki in about 1960 and it was called—the title is escaping me right now—but basically it dealt with Hiroshima and the bombing of Hiroshima, and the ushering in of a nuclear age. It was very striking because of the kind of instrumental techniques that Pinderetzki used in that particular piece. But that was a very pivotal piece that reflects the social reality of something that’s going on.

The whole history of music, which deals with humans’ lack of tolerance for other humans, is full of it. Going back centuries to today, people are writing a piece to commemorate something that happened musically. In terms of my own work, I mentioned In Memoriam of Martin Luther King; an electronic piece that I wrote was called Black Martyrs: Malcolm, Martin, and Medgar. There are a series of different pieces that deal with that kind of thing, and many other composers were doing the same thing. So music written in direct reaction to something, some cataclysmic event that occurred. For example,
9/11, there are several pieces that have been written commemorating that tragedy.

Wilmot: That’s interesting. So the composer becomes the chronicler, the griot.

Wilson: Exactly, exactly.

Wilmot: So you wouldn’t suddenly have these principles of we’re only using these kinds of noises because they go into this kind—?

Wilson: It’s both / and. And sometime the choice of technique. For example, the choice of how a composer puts together these sources, the sort of surface qualities of the music have much to do with where the composer comes from and where the composer is going, you know. But the sentiment that the composer is attempting to express is often one that is shared in a very fundamental way with those people who happened to experience that or have been around it when that occurred. For example, 9/11, I’ve heard 9/11 pieces that are very contemporary sounding, very avant-garde sounding, 9/11 pieces that are very 19th century oriented, too. The fact that they are writing and are attempting to express something of their experience of that is the kind of thing that you find in particular periods.

Wilmot: I wanted to return to this question of—last time I asked this question you kind of skimmed over this briefly, and I thought, “Oh, that sounds interesting.” This was this whole conversation with Barbara Christian’s husband at the time, David Henderson, you two were debating the meaning of Jimi Hendrix? Is that correct? What is that?

Wilson: We weren’t exactly debating the meaning. It was the relative—actually we were dealing with what people might refer to as reception theory. Reception theory has to do with how people receive art, what they are expecting, and so forth. But without getting into that, because that depends on whose reception theory it is and so forth. But, what we were really debating about Jimi Hendrix was the relative importance of Jimi Hendrix at that time—we’re talking about the early seventies, now—to various audiences. Because clearly Jimi Hendrix was a person who appealed to a different audience than most black blues players had appealed to at that time. Jimi Hendrix becomes famous primarily in England, and in the United States, too. But his biggest following was in England, he lived a lot in England, spent a lot of time, he played with a lot of British players though he came up in blues, the black blues tradition. There was also Jimi Hendrix’s—you know any musician, any public figure, once you become a public figure, your choice of what you do and how you do it reflects you. If you look at Sly and the Family Stone, you remember them. There was a certain persona they had. Let me ask you. I’m curious about this. What do you remember about Sly and the Family Stone? About appearance?
Wilmot: I don’t remember much about appearance, I only remember the song “I Am Everyday People.” That’s all I remember actually.

Wilson: Do you remember what they look like?

Wilmot: Kind of rock and roll bohemian folks. That’s how I remember them.


Wilmot: I don’t know very much, and I also associate them with this other group that came much later which is the Family Stand, which is very different.

Wilson: Sly and the Family Stone, the Family Stand.

Wilmot: I think it’s just language.

Wilson: Now, Sly and the Family Stone burst on the scene and they sort of manifest certain other kinds of things. They were certainly part of the soul tradition, but they were coming into a different kind of soul tradition in the sense that—when I use the term soul, and I’ve lived long enough to know when that term first started being used a lot, because I was a teenager then. The whole business was when singers who were associated primarily with gospel music or religious music began to sing popular music. There’s this whole business of people moving back and forth as part of African American music history, but there’s certain periods when there is a big transfer, and one such period was in the middle fifties, when people like Ray Charles, Aretha Franklin a little bit later, hit the scene. Ray Charles brought this inimitable voice and it’s a voice that you associate with gospel music, church music, and he’s singing, [sings] “I got a women way across town that’s good to me,” or whatever he was singing. Then Aretha Franklin—

Wilmot: Not church music.

Wilson: That’s right, he was singing this, it was not church music, but it was all the nuances of gospel music. So people said, “That’s soulful, that sounds like church, that’s soulful.” Suddenly the name soul came to distinguish it from the other rhythm and blues that was around it. Because soul follows rhythm and blues, at least the designation. And these terms then became part of the trade industry and so then they became established. But there was a definable difference in the sound that one could hear and one could recognize. You get a little bit later on into the sixties, late sixties and early seventies, and you get in the sixties the Vietnam War, drugs, sex, and—what was the other? Drug, sex, and videotape?—Rock ‘n roll. Rock ‘n roll of course grows out of rhythm and blues. Rock ‘n roll is really is initially white folk’s version of rhythm and blues. Elvis Presley started doing the same thing that black folks started doing, and because he was white and so forth and a good-looking guy, he became hip. Because it was always a problem with the black guy who was a singer—
and any idol’s going to have people attracted them—they had this black guy up there and the white kids who liked him, liked him, but it was kind of forbidden fruit: you can like him, but as long as it’s not as an individual. But still there are some people who are attracted to them as them. Then when you have whites doing it, then it’s okay, you can idolize them in those days, because the racial lines are clearly drawn. So what happens after soul? Whites begin imitating and it becomes rock n’ roll, literally taking the same songs, just like “Blue Suede Shoes,” or better still “You Ain’t Nothin’ but a Hound Dog,” probably Elvis Presley’s biggest song. The first public recording of that was by Big Mama Thornton. I was always do this in my class. People who know soul music heard but a lot of people haven’t heard it and don’t know that this predated Elvis Presley by at least a year.

Wilmot: What was her name?

Wilson: Big Mama Thornton, and she was a big, Kansas City, shoutin’ blues singer, African American woman. [sings] “You ain’t nothin’ but a hound dog!” It’s really a very powerful thing. Elvis Presley copied it, did it his way, but copied it. But his was a big hit. Well, so you’ve got this transfer going on. Then in the sixties you had the whole psychedelic thing: drugs and the colors, the blues and the reds and so forth. So you had most of the black blues singers were still performing within the rhythm and blues tradition, the quartets, the individual singers, the soul singers, a la Ray Charles, then later on Aretha Franklin. But then there are slightly different technical musical differences that we can talk about if you want to talk about it. But then you had coming out of California particularly, and out of Oakland and this East Bay Area, you had some new stuff which brought some of the visual accoutrements associated with one aspect of the rock ‘n roll, and that was the sort of drug bit. And that was the psychedelic bit. It was very into colors, the stripes, the hats, the glasses, the whole different hit look circa 1969, 1968-1969. And that was when Sly and the Family Stone emerged. Sly had been a disc jockey in Oakland or somewhere, and he came out mostly with his family in this group, and they dressed in these very strong psychedelic things. The group was different, because I don’t think he played anything but he sang, he had a female trumpet player who was very cool-looking. You didn’t see any women playing. But there were women playing, other people playing, and then what’s his name? Larry Graham played bass. It was a strike beat and it was a powerful kind of thing. The form was slightly different and it was hot and it was outside and it was very different. [sings] “Let me take you to—,” whatever they were doing. And there were allusions to the drug experience. They were talking about that. That created an entirely different sensibility.

So I’m saying that to say that created something that pulls back this relationship from whites to blacks in American music is based on imitation. The first American music is—I may have said this—whites imitating blacks, who imitated whites who imitated blacks. Did I talk about that? Well, anyway,
I talk about that in my class, the whole business of how it feeds on one another, one group imitates another, another group imitates another.

Wilmot: You did. You also talked about it in the context—there was one way that you spoke about it that was really interesting. You were talking about the first American musical form being minstrelsy which was based on precisely that kind of exchange, if you can call it an exchange. Maybe it’s not an exchange.

Wilson: I’d say appropriation revitalization syndrome. That’s where you appropriate and you revitalize, and then you appropriate that. This is a way that that happened. Sometime in that revitalization, it is revitalized by taking something that came from that which was appropriated and then adding something different to it. I think that’s what happens in the case of psychedelic soul. The manifestation of the psychedelic are not just glasses, the shades are part of it, but the colored glasses; the reds, the blues, the pinks, and that sort of—

Wilmot: What about musically, did you see that actually happening musically?

Wilson: Yeah, musically, in certain ways. In certain ways of taking the beat. There’s a difference between—I hate to say rock, because rock is so many things nowadays—but back then the rock beat was not quite the same thing as a soul beat. They were similar but not quite the same because rock is appropriated. But the rock beat had more of a march, just straight, straight, straight, but the soul beat had a lighter feel, but you could focus on some of that thing. But when the psychedelic soul came out, or this kind of soul came out, it used some of the stuff from rock, but it reaffirmed some of the stuff even more so that was part of the soul. That’s what Sly and the Family Stone and Larry Graham and all those people did.

But what it did say, it acknowledged the psychedelic thing. We started talking about this because of Jimi Hendrix. Jimi Hendrix comes out of that generation, so Jimi Hendrix was aware of that earlier deep, down-home blues stuff, but he was also aware of this drug sort of psychedelic stuff. So he put the two together. Because he put the two together, his whole persona, the clothes he wore, how he looked. Everybody had an Afro at that time, but there are Afros and then there are Afros. There are Afros that wanted to be cool and there are Afros that didn’t care. [laughs] Jimi was more like the Afros who didn’t care. Jimi also—his coming of age also had to do with where he was. Somehow I associate him more with England, I don’t know when he made his first hits, but I know that it was very dominant in England with psychedelic music and all of that and the Beatles were really riding high. He was a part of it. But he was appealing more, and he did appeal more during his lifetime, to a largely young, white audience, as opposed to other blues singers. And the point of debate that David and I were having, I was saying to David that there’s a difference between them—of course David’s idea, wish David was here, he could give his point of view—but I was saying there’s a difference
and Jimi Hendrix represents a different sensibility. That’s why he’s not as popular in the Black community as he is in the white community. Not taking anything away from him as an innovative person, because he was an innovative person, but the nuances and the range of what he was doing was something that grew out of the psychedelic thing, and appealed more to that audience than it did to your traditional African American audience in Oakland and in the typical predominantly Black areas. That, I said, is important: you have a black performer that appeals more to white folks than he does black folks, but he’s playing in a tradition that is shared by both Blacks and Whites, but the particular genre that he’s playing is one that is more popular in the White community that the black community.

That also was a time that you also had the rise of some other black performances, not in rock and roll, people like Charlie Pride is a Black man who sang country music. He was very big, singing country music, and he still is big. The fact that you don’t know him tells me is that he’s not as big as he used to be. [laughter]

Wilmot: Well I’m also not a country music person.

Wilson: Well I’m not either, but the point is that at a certain point you get to be a public figure. For example, whether you know about country or not, there are some country folks—if I asked you to name two country people, either you may not have ever heard of them, but you could name two or three, you know.

Wilmot: Should I? I will.

Wilson: Yeah, who, who would you name?

Wilmot: Conway Twittie.

Wilson: Conway Twittie, that’s certainly one, okay

Wilmot: Loretta Lynn.

Wilson: See, you got it. If I asked you to name two songs by Loretta Lynn you may or may not be able to do so, but the point is you know who she is. Charlie Pride in 1975 was the kind of name most people who followed music, popular music in general, would probably know. But he’s not as popular now, I guess he’s older now, he’s older than me. But for those aficionados of country music they would know Charlie Pride. But that was also an anomaly: A black person singing country music in this popular world and he was making it. And he wasn’t the kind of black person who was influenced by country music to a certain degree but still rooted in something else, like—what’s his name? Played guitar, “Sweet Sixteen,” “St. Louis.”

Wilmot: Chuck Berry? It was just that I was named after one of his songs.
Wilson: Okay, I played with Chuck Berry a couple of times. Chuck Berry was influenced a little by country, but the fundamental root of his stuff was in the rhythm and blues stuff, so “Roll Over Beethoven,” JONK! Jonk! Jonk! Jonk! Then he’d do his little thing and the women would scream. I never could understand why all the women would scream when Chuck Berry would get down on his knees and do his little duck walk. It was a little gimmick that he used. He still uses it now.

And the other thing was amplification. I played in a house band that played with him. It didn’t make any difference what we did because his amplification was up so loud that it just dominated everything. We’d just bang on the piano or whatever. We weren’t amplified. So the transition from acousticization to amplification made a big difference.

Wilmot: Was David Henderson’s position that Jimi Hendrix was through and through—still claiming him as a Black tradition?

Wilson: I think that was it, I think that was it. It was a matter of degree. And he was saying that, “No, he’s part of the Black tradition, too.” I said, well he is part of the black tradition, but it is more peripheral because—this is why reception theory—because how people perceive him and receive him. And that changes.

Wilmot: Yes, it does change. I bet he was making this—I’m not sure, I could be making this totally up—I can see that the argument that he was part of a black tradition of syncretism.

Wilson: I think that Jimi Hendrix clearly was part of the African American tradition, I was simply saying that at that time, within that community, he was less important to that community. And I cited him because of what he did and how he did it. People were very suspicious of it, even though black communities were certainly not immune to drugs, but it was a way of demonstrating that which was different.

Wilmot: It was a departure in some way because it was actually raising up a lifestyle and choices that people don’t usually raise up, they usually put it away or keep it hidden.

Wilson: “She’s a Junkie,” [sings] “Stone cold junkie, uh-huh.” People are singing about it and talking about it and sort of realized it, but it wasn’t celebrating it. It was like these values are—we do it, but we don’t talk about it, you know.

Wilmot: Reception theory? Can you give me some names?

Wilson: I’m trying to think, I’m can’t off the top of my head. But it really is something used a lot in popular music and looking at what is it that people are expecting when they go.
How is it brought into play when people talk about contemporary music and composing?

I think that’s also part of it. Reception theory, as I understand it, can be applied to anything, any kind of art. I think what it attempts to do in terms of trying to figure out what this phenomena is about is try to take into consideration the audience as well. That’s why it’s very interesting if you look at African American music, because I contend and have long contended that an important part of what happens in traditional African music and traditional African American music is that one is concerned with the creation of a different set of experiences where the performer and the audience become one. Where you create a kind of dynamism where people are responding directly to what the audience does. I’ve even coined terms, one term I like is a term called soul focal point. Have I ever talked about that before?

Say it again.

Soul [spells it] focal point.

No.

By that I mean if you are dealing with—the reason I got involved with this is because if you are dealing with a soloist, let’s say a jazz soloist or a gospel soloist or a blues soloist. You say, “What is going on here? What is significant here?” Now you can look at the notes, you can count those up, you can analyze a solo as a solo. But what is really important is the relationship between the performer and the audience. Why is it that at certain points that performer will play something and everybody will go, “Wow!” and spontaneously a group of two thousand, three thousand people will all react to something. Part of it has to do with the pyrotechnics that have to do with anybody showing off, you know, an opera singer hitting a note that’s higher than anybody else can hit. Everybody claps. Or an acrobat doing a triple somersault on ice skates. Part of that has to do with sheer technique and people just respond to that. But I think that in many genres of African American music, and to different degrees other musical traditions as well, there are certain things people do that are so much out of what is anticipated, and yet so fulfilling and satisfying that people really respond immediately to that because they do something. It might be that they hesitate a little bit, or they go a little bit faster. It’s not higher or lower, not necessarily sheer technique, but it’s something that’s unique about their expression, you expect this particular event to complete this event and it doesn’t, it does something else. And because it doesn’t fulfill your expectations, you go, “Wow, what was that? Gee.” [claps hands] You just want to respond to that. That then fuels the artist to say okay I hit ‘em, I’m going to do something else again that builds this up again. So this sort of communicative kind of experience, which is very fantastic, exists between a really exceptional artist and a really exceptional sensitive audience.
Wilmot: I’m hearing that and part of me is also thinking about movie music, only because I think there is a level at which the audience of soundtracks really anticipates what’s going to happen—.

Wilson: Yes, they shape—but the difference—that’s important and I think it’s interesting that you think about that. Because what I think movie music does in this instance is to create the context and to carry you along. In opera they use this whole leitmotif idea, they associate this theme with this person, so that at a subliminal time every time you hear that person, you hear that music. But you aren’t aware of them, you’re looking at the person but the music is setting the stage. Well, movie music does that, too, but the difference is that there is a scenario in movie music which you know, you tie it together, where the music becomes part of the scenario, an identifier of that scenario. But in abstract music—I’m referring to all music as being abstract that doesn’t have a theatrical theme or anything like that—then the music itself does that, the music and the relationship of that music, how you move in time, how you create this narrative, this sound narrative in time defines the experience for you. If you try to get at that experience, if you look at how the audience reacts, it gives you a marker of that.

There’s also a difference—for example in traditional African American music the audience seems to be an important part of the act. If you played and nobody clapped, nobody said “Go! Yay!” It would be, “God, this is a dead gig. I didn’t communicate.” But if you go to a European concert, though, and somebody’s playing Mozart, and in the middle of Mozart, you don’t stand up [claps] and jump and scream and holler. You do it a little bit in opera, but opera is sort of complicated, because that’s theater, that’s also Italy, that’s the Mediterranean, there’s a lot of influences in that Mediterranean basin, ideals and values from the world south of that I think is very important. But that whole idea about this audience being a shaper, making this whole experience greater than it is. That’s why if you play it, you play by yourself, you might do something great, it’s not the same as playing great and hearing people say, “Go!” and people knowing that this is a special point. So reception theory tries to deal with that, but I think it’s fundamental to understanding what’s going on in a live musical situation. “What is going on?” People come back just completely thrilled with what happened, and it’s different from listening to a record of the same thing.

Wilmot: Shall we close for today?

Wilson: Yes, I’m good, I’m sort of warmed over.

[End of interview 10]
Interview 11: June 30, 2003

Wilmot: Today I wanted to talk to you a little bit more about your music and your composing, and especially the work you’ve done around spirituals. I wanted to ask you, when you think about the principal emotions conveyed by spirituals in terms of music, how would you talk about those and what are the mechanisms for conveying those emotions musically?

Wilson: In the first place, the spiritual, as I think I said before, is probably the earliest and the most profound music I have ever experienced. Part of it has to do with the fact that my father was a vocalist—a singer. And a repertoire that he knew very well was the spiritual. He knew other music as well, but he really knew the spiritual. He performed in the Harry Burleigh Choral Society in Saint Louis, a society whose name was always a mystery to me because Burleigh which I assumed was spelled ‘BURLY’ or ‘BURLEY’ was really spelled ‘BURLEIGH.’ When I first saw that I said, “That’s a funny spelling, why is he associated with spirituals?” Because it is not a typical African American name or spelling.

I remember reflecting upon that as a kid, when I got old enough to think about it. And, “Why is there a society named Harry T. Burleigh?” But since then I discovered why, and I became fascinated by the entire history of the spiritual, and that was very, very important. But there’s another aspect of the spiritual—an emotional level to the spiritual, which is also very important to me. Because I knew just hearing this music at an early age that this was very powerful in terms of being a vehicle of expressing human emotional ideals in the specific reflection of the African American experience, but something much deeper than that and broader and universal in the best sense of the word. I remember being fascinated by that and being attracted to that. As a young man and as a person interested in music, I didn’t tap into that except as an auditor, as a person who heard the music and said there’s something very powerful going on here in all of its different aspects. I understood at an earlier age the relationship of the so-called art-song spiritual, that is, the kind of music that Harry T. Burleigh wrote, to the vernacular spiritual, that is, the spirituals that were sung by the indigenous peoples, the ones in the context in which they occurred. All of that made sense to me.

I didn’t have the view then and I never have agreed and still don’t agree with the notion that the “cultured spiritual” is somehow devoid of its most powerful aspects. The cultivated spiritual of a Harry T. Burleigh, that is, the arranged spiritual for a soloist still managed to convey the basic essence of this tradition, which had to do for me, with dealing with the essence of questioning existence, human existence, having suffered all the ravages that slavery provided, but somehow superceding or overcoming that, and transcending that and dealing with the joy of life in spite of that. That’s what I found so powerful as a theme, as an idea, and as a reality for the people.
So spirituals represent transcendence above the desolation that you can think of in terms of slavery. That idea was probably not crystallized so much in my youth, but the fascination with it and with the power of it. Then as I got older and I learned more about the history of the spiritual and what it really meant, it became a very, very powerful source of musical ideas for me. So as a composer, I began to tap into that. Not gradually, but more and more. The older I get, it seems so natural to me because it reflects something very solid. So that reservoir of sensibilities, sensitivities, and also as a reservoir of cultural traits, of the cultural ideas of African American music, which really informs to a great degree what I do, became central to me as a creative artist.

Then of course, there are other genres, too, outside of spirituals. Spirituals, the blues, jazz, in general, but the spirituals, because they are spirituals they deal that something outside of oneself that is more concrete. Then as I studied African culture, I began to see how spirituals are clearly related to African culture and how that long trajectory takes us back to something very, very important. So all of that, the intellectual, the historical, all of that, and that which is the feeling side of it became all crystallized in my thought.

Wilmot: I wanted to ask you a couple questions. First, you said as a young man, listening to your father, spirituals made an impression on you, do you remember having a favorite or one that stayed with you? Do you have a favorite now? Those are two questions.

Wilson: That’s a difficult question to answer because there are several favorites. I don’t have any one, but there are several. The idea of “Sometimes I Feel like a Motherless Child.” That didn’t hit me all at once. [sings] “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child” was something I heard most my life. But then when I started thinking about it, “God, how can you feel like a motherless child?” It’s contradictory, and yet is there a more powerful image or metaphor than a motherless child? How can you be a motherless child? Even Jesus Christ had a mother. The father might have been dubious [laughs] but the mother was clear. I mean there was Mary and there was Jesus and this bond between mother and child is so powerful, but then if you say, “A motherless child?” An orphan?

But it’s more than that, it’s more than an orphan. A motherless child means being devoid of having that nurture, that support, that succor that you need that is so fundamental. ‘I feel like a motherless child’ is such a powerful image when you really think about it. That really struck me. So that spiritual was one. There are others, whole categories of spirituals, there are spirituals that exult and celebrate and, you know, “I got shoes, you got shoes, all of God’s children got shoes, when we get to heaven, going to put on our shoes, going to walk all over God’s heaven.” The idea that slaves, most of whom who didn’t have shoes in many contexts, would sing about having shoes, getting to heaven and then walking all over God’s heaven. Now it’s one thing to have shoes, “When I get to heaven, I want to have my wings,” there’s
something about wings. But it’s not only wings, it’s “I’m going to put on my shoes and I’m gonna walk all over God’s heaven.”

Wilmot: Mobility.

Wilson: “I’m going to put on my wings and fly all over God’s heaven.” You’re going to exult, you’re going to do things that you wanted to do all the time, but you’re really going to do it in a positive way. Part of that idea, you talk about the other world, and that’s part of that. When people look at spirituals and they deal with transcending and “getting over,” and flying beyond what are the bounds of reality. But you can also look at it from the African perspective, which says that reality is all in the spiritual world itself. So, if you can think it, you can do it. That is, it’s outside of the day-to-day normality, it’s something that transcends—it’s something that gets you beyond the pedestrian. And just singing about it elevates your experience. So that is another idea.

Actually I think it’s part of the reasons why Africans became Christians, and not just Christians but primarily Protestants. Catholics, too, in many parts of the world, especially in South America and the Caribbean. But there is something about that ideology there, the ideology was great because people could see the relationship of the saints overcoming hardships and giving themselves to God, and transcending the ravages of everyday life from an ideological point of view. But in the Protestant notion it was less ideological and more practical in the sense that you are able, just because you are. You are able to overcome whatever you’ve got to overcome, right then and there. It’s sort of the immediacy of it all that helped to deal with—which didn’t necessarily deal with ideology.

What I’m saying is that within this scheme of things, the Protestant religions, because of the way they developed and certainly not all of them, and certainly not the Episcopalians, but certainly the relatively new religions of the Baptist and the Methodists, which in the seventeenth century, the eighteenth century, middle eighteenth century was new and talked about an individual relationship with God, and individual relationship with Christ. So the Protestant hymnals would write hymns about “Jesus savior of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly.” This whole view about an individual relationship with Christ which started with Martin Luther and the whole idea of to heck with this celestial music, let’s deal with music that people can sing and so forth in the 12th century, and moves all the way up, by the time you get to the eighteenth century, the Methodists, the sort of methodical way of worshipping, but the whole point of it was to have an individual relationship with your idea of the deity.

That is consistent and congruent with traditional African views which say that you have a very close personal relationship with the deity, and the deity takes possession of your body by means of music. You have to have music in traditional African culture because music is the means by which you call forth the deities.
So you take a person who is suddenly thrust into an American world, or into a Western world, a Western ideology, and though you may not accept all of it, you certainly accept that part. Because if you have these white Methodists who are having something that they call the “jerks,” sort of moving in an incomprehensible way and having religious feelings of individual interpretations of their relationship to the “deity” and suddenly acting in a way of very intense behavioral patterns which were okay because they were your own, then, that’s very consistent with traditional African views. So that’s the reason why the majority of African exiles, as they thought of themselves, became Protestants.

Now, in the Caribbean it is very different. In the Caribbean it was the ideology that, okay, this saint is like that. But in both cases they saw something that was consistent with their traditional roots. Therefore they were able to embrace that something, because it enabled them to create something that Al Raboteau calls the “Invisible Empire [sic.]”⁴ The Invisible Empire is a surrogate way of maintaining traditional beliefs without the specificity of the traditional views. That’s my view of that.

But when I think about that and when I think about the emotional impact of that, I think of my own experience hundreds of years later with my father and the generations of generations of people of not knowing why, but knowing that somehow this ties together the group, it ties together the sense of the past, the present, and the future. So that became a very, very powerful approach to study African American culture. That’s part of a long way of saying that’s part of my fascination, adoration and admiration for the spiritual tradition both historically and as a musical form.

Wilmot: What do you think of the position that religion was used as a control mechanism for African Americans slaves and to perpetuate the slavery and to keep peoples’ spirits subjugated?

Wilson: Sure, I think that view is stated most dramatically in the Marxist sense, “religion, the opiate of the people,” in general, but certainly applied to the slave situation and the slave trade, and the European occupation of Africa, and the imperialistic view of establishing colonies. I think from a political point of view, that makes sense; that is, first come the soldiers, then come the priests. And to get people to change culturally to adapt to that, but I think it’s simplistic to look at that as a whole thing. If, for example, the reflection of religious fervor had been expressed only in the learned tradition of the priest, then I’d say, “Okay, certainly we’ve lost something important.”

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⁴ Al Raboteau’s theory on the origin of African slave religious practices is known as the “Invisible Institution.”
But that never was the case. It never was the case then, and it is not the case now. The fact is that a dominant expression of religion today is the charismatic religions, not coming from the European way, though congruent with that. The Methodist were charismatic people too, they had people jumping around and dancing, religious dances, too. They danced differently, but they danced. And they believed in the ideology that expressions of religious fervor are okay. But that’s the linchpin as far as I’m concerned. Once you say that, “Okay, if that’s okay, hey, I can do that too, but I do it this way,” and the way I do it is rooted in hundreds of years of movement and motion and the fact that music is an integral part of motion, and motion is an integral part of music and music is a force, music is a power, music causes something to happen.

Those fundamental ideological beliefs about the relationship of music and life were able to exist within this new context. So it said, “Music is fine, it’s religion, and somewhere over yonder we’re going to get better and so forth.” But it was more than the over yonder, it was the here and now because by acting in that way, it gave support and it supported people emotionally so they were able to deal with it. That’s how they were able to get over. This whole idea of going somewhere else, sometime over yonder, when I get my wings on or whatever the spiritual text said. The spiritual text existed on so many different levels. It also gave people the opportunity of celebrating their way of life here and now.

So getting back to your question, the idea about Christianity being a turn away from Africa, I don’t buy that completely. Ideologically, yes, to move from a multi-deistic world to a mono-deistic world, is an important shift. But, if in so doing it you also maintain all the behavioral practices that are associated with the tradition, and not only do that but you affect the other religion. That is, this charismatic way was so powerful that not only blacks did it in the 17th, 18th century, whites started doing it.

If you look at the literature, white scholars are saying, “What’s going on? Not only are we having these blacks stamping around and dancing, we’ve got a lot of white folks doing that, too.” They were doing it a little bit more in England before they got here, but they’re really doing it now, and they’re doing it more like the blacks are doing it than they did, than the Europeans did it.

Wilmot: There were the Quakers and the Shakers and there was—

Wilson: Quakers and Shakers, but mainly the Methodists and the Baptists, the Wesley brothers who came over here from England. And they were doing it in a certain way, they were doing it a little bit in England and then they came over here and this confluence of the blacks and the Methodists together, the Great Awakening it was called. The Europeans were doing it and the black would be allowed to come around partially because the Methodists were one of the few
groups that said, “Well, we don’t know about these slaves being equal to us because the predominant view was that blacks were somewhere in between apes and humans.”

Even though Darwin hadn’t quite developed the origin of the species, there still was this idea of blacks that began to develop concomitant with the development of slavery. Because before that time, in the Renaissance and earlier, blacks were around and sometimes they were treated pejoratively and sometimes they weren’t. Because the whole institution of slavery existed in a lot of different cultures, not only in African cultures, in European cultures, too. So it wasn’t quite the same as Chattel slavery, where you deny the very humanity of slaves, and then you develop an intellectual approach that flowers in the nineteenth century right in the middle of European imperialism, which says that these people aren’t worth anything anyway, they aren’t really humans, they’re somewhere between apes and men. They came from Africa so they’re apelike people.

Wilmot: I have a question for you Olly, which is, you said that you started bringing spirituals into your music and it wasn’t something that you started doing earlier in your career, it was something that kind of happened later. What changed for you?

Wilson: I think when you’re young, when you start out, you’re looking for models. When you embark—I mean I was embracing a whole new thing. I knew a lot, not in great detail, but I knew from an experiential way a lot about African American music—my father was a musician; I grew up in St. Louis; I was trying to play from an early age of seven, eight; and I heard all this music around me, some of which, you know, the blues was fairly common in St. Louis; I had a great blues tradition; I went to a Baptist Church where we had a senior choir, gospel choir and a children’s and a young people’s choir.

So I heard some of the people singing the old spirituals in the old traditional way. My father belonged to this more formal kind, of course, even though the essence of it was related to the old spirituals that we heard. Jazz was hot by the time I hit twelve, thirteen, I was really interested in jazz. All of this music was around me, I was learning a lot of it. I didn’t know the historical context, I didn’t care much about that because I’m just trying to do it, I’m trying to imitate what I’m hearing.

I heard rhythm and blues right in the middle of when rhythm and blues was hot. This was before the development of rock. I mean we’re talking about late forties, early fifties. I’m a kid then, but still I’m listening to all this stuff around me. Then, there was the gospel music which was around me. So I heard all of this music around me; I figured out some things; I studied formally. I knew there was a difference between a formal world and a performing world because I knew too many people who couldn’t read music, but they could play. Sometimes only in the same key, only in certain ways,
but they were very good at expressing themselves musically. I saw that
dichotomy and figured that out, “Hey that’s cool and I want to do both. Why
can’t you do both?”

This was at a time when people said well, if you do this, you can’t do this.
Then as I got older and I went to the university, when I was learning at
university, I learned European culture. So I’m learning that quite a bit
formally and I was embracing a lot of that because it made sense to me. But I
knew at the same time there was an earlier tradition which also made sense. I
never eschewed that. It was always important to learn this and it seemed
logical, “Why don’t you add on rather than toss either away?” There are
things that are important for you to learn here.

What that meant to me as a young composer—and I think I began to think of
myself as a composer by probably, I know, my sophomore year in college,
because that was when I was doing my second year of music theory where we
were supposed to write things—something about the literate world in Western
society is important. If you’re able to write it, if you’re able to reproduce it—
and it is somewhat superficially related to the scientific method—if you can
demonstrate that this works every time you use it, and you have an
explanation of how and why.

The idea of thinking about music as a system, a system that has its own logic.
That’s what composer’s learn in academia, you learn the theory, “Is this
theory valid or invalid? How does it work?” Those kinds of questions you
raise in a post-Renaissance Western society. On the other hand, you also know
the immediacy of a world that says, “I don’t care if you can explain it, if you
can do it, that works too.” And that has a vitality that is important to me, too.
So I took both of these views with me, but at a certain point in my life, I knew
there was a lot about the theoretical side, and about the written tradition which
I felt was important that I didn’t know. So, I had to literally privilege that
because I wanted to learn it. So, that’s what I did.

Then, when you’re trying to learn something, you look at models. And who
are the models you are looking at? Well, you’re at a Western school, nobody’s
looking at the oral tradition. Well, people are talking a little bit about the oral
tradition in the tenth, ninth century, but that was very esoteric, too, so you
only got a little bit of that, but you got this whole tradition that people learned
in the cultivated tradition which is basically music from the last 250 years,
primarily eighteenth, some seventeenth—late 17th, 18th century, 19th century.
That’s it. As a matter of fact, I remember “the masterpieces of music” and
they were all from the last 250 years, of European music. So that put a
framework around what you’re doing and it privileged, clearly, the written
tradition.

So when you’re learning, you buy consciously or unconsciously into that. I
don’t think that I completely bought into that, but I bought in enough because
I knew that I had to in order to learn what I wanted to learn. But then, as you learn more, you understand how individual interpretation is much more important, and then you start to look into what is unique about me? That happened to coincide with the time—I graduated from college in 1959, I was in graduate school in 1960. I went to Florida A&M for my first job when I was twenty-two years old. When you’re twenty-two and you’re teaching at a college—I’m at Florida A&M in 1960, I’m twenty-two years old, and there were a lot of veterans from the Korean War who were there. These people were ten, fifteen years older than me. I’m the young kid, the young prodigy there, and when you’re the young prodigy you sometimes think like “the young prodigy,” and things came quickly to me and so I figured okay, I’ve got it all down.

But you learn that there are other things that are important. Fortunately I learned that quickly, rather than later. I learned patience, and I learned how to look more carefully and more critically outside of the academic environment at what’s really important. So all of this experience saved me in certain ways. I think we talked a little bit about this before, how the Florida A&M experience saved me in certain ways, because it made me aware, not directly but over time, of the limitations and the biases that were built into the academic system that I learned. At the same time, I never lost respect for some values that I learned. So I didn’t throw out the baby with the bath water, you know. I think that was healthy, too.

But then also, historically, what’s going on around me in 1960? The freedom movements, the freedom rides, all of that etc. And I’m twenty-two years old and figuring out where do I fit into this? Then I discover that the person who I replaced, was fired because this person was participating in acts of civil disobedience and that was something that I was doing back in St. Louis in the first place. And I was going, “Wait a minute, this is kind of weird,” and I’m trying to figure out where I am and how do I traverse these minefields.

Wilmot: I have a question for you. This is a question that I might need help asking. Basically, I’m trying to get into the technical aspects of—what are the structural components of the spiritual that convey those emotions that you were speaking of, the absolute desolation of, “Sometimes I feel like a motherless child” or exulting music?

Wilson: You’re asking a very profound question. Let me give you the answer as best I can. I think it is impossible to express succinctly, or any other way, how a particular genre of music in general or a specific piece conveys this indefinable something that really excites you and really communicates with you in a powerful way. I spent a lot of my life thinking about that, and many of the people I know have attempted to do that. In any kind of music, it’s difficult to articulate that. What you can articulate is some of the general musical ways that perhaps create the kind of logical system—if you believe that music is a logical system, and I do fundamentally believe that. But having
said that, then I can move on. Because what I can say is that I’m not saying that is a *sine qua non* of what this music is. I’m not trying to say that essentially this is the essence of it, because I think that you run into some problems if you try to define the quintessential essence of this or any particular musical tradition.

Wilmot: In terms of a structured, systematic—like a resolved third, or something like that?

Wilson: Exactly, exactly. I think that on the other hand you can say that there are some general qualities, there are some general musical practices that imply some conceptual associations of that. It sounds like I’m talking out of both sides of my mouth. So on one hand I’m saying that you cannot put your hand on the essence of it. On the other hand I’m saying it is a system, and if it is a system, there must me some means by which you identify one thing from another. That is, how do you determine that that’s a glass as opposed to a can? The minute you hear James Brown sing or Charlie Parker play, you say that’s James Brown or that’s Charlie Parker. And it’s not that you memorize everything that James Brown has ever sung or Charlie Parker has ever played. You can do that, too, and you know not only is this Charlie Parker playing, this is Charlie Parker playing “Embraceable you.” Or this is Charlie Parker playing “Parker’s Mood.” You can memorize, but there are millions of people who couldn’t identify the piece, but they know it’s that performer or they know it’s that style. So the genre must have certain kinds of ideas.

I’ve spent a lot of time in my career trying to look at what are these ideas that inform the tradition in general, tradition specifically. I’ve tried to frame them in terms of things that are not quantitative but are qualitative. So I use this whole notion, and I think if there is a contribution I’ve made to scholarship, it’s this: it has to do with thinking about it in terms of conceptual approaches by trying to determine how African music is related to African American music.

The history of it is very clear. People didn’t come from the moon, they came from Africa, they came from specific places in Africa. We’ve got the data. So we don’t have to make it up. We know where they came from. Depending on who is talking about it, people estimate from twelve to thirty million people made “the Middle Passage,” perhaps maybe ten million died, who knows? But we have got the documents! We’ve got the material from the captains of the ships and scholars have found even more detail. So we know that this is not just made up! History is always a reflection of the people and their ideology—why people are doing it, so it made sense for the people who created slavery to say that these people were ignorant and there was this *tabula rasa* theory—that is that people came here devoid of any cultural history, they had to learn everything here. They don’t speak Swahili, nor do they speak Yoruba or Twi in this country. People speak English in this country, but the rejoinder is that they speak English in a certain way, there’s a way in which English is spoken,
and that’s even reflected today in speech patterns and cultural patterns and ways of thinking.

Wilmot: This was the debate between Frazier and—.


But getting back to this point, though, as it relates to music. What I’ve suggested is that there are certain conceptual biases. Conceptual biases that say things like this, for example: there is a bias to view music as being a continuum between speech and song, so that whether you’re talking about African music or you’re talking about African American music, you find over and over again this continuum between speech and song. You find it reflected in different kinds of music, you find it reflected in spirituals, where people use a lot of intensifiers in the singing of the music. It’s not only the singing of words, but it’s using the phrases of verbal intensifiers to shape the music. It’s also in thinking of music as having a whole range of sounds as opposed to a certain stylized way of singing, which you have in many, “classical” traditions. You have a privileging of people who use techniques in which they exploit the different range of sounds. There’s an article I’ve written about the heterogeneous sound ideal, I call it. What I mean by that is that within a traditional performance, you’ll find a wide range of different sounds, or different timbres. A timbre is a musical word which means—the difference between a trumpet and a trombone or trumpet and a violin playing the same note. In some traditions the ideal is to have a blend of the sounds, as in a string quartet; all the string instruments sound similar, their timbre is similar, so they blend in a certain way. Or an Italian Renaissance choir, where the idea is to blend. So much so that, if you have ever sung in a choir, not only is that the ideal, but its influenced a lot of ideals in most European music so that if you sing, people don’t want to hear individuals, they want everybody to blend in a certain way. I’d like to make an analogy to—didn’t we talk about this? I feel I might be repeating myself.

Wilmot: What is the analogy?

Wilson: The analogy is like in food. In for example, French food, you have a great French soup. You’ve got the carrots, you’ve the spinach, you’ve got whatever, but everything is emulsified, so when you get it there’s this beautiful sauce, it might look orange, it might look green, but you don’t know the individual components. You hear this, “Ooh la la, this is great,” you know. That’s a cultural ideal. You compare that with an Asian ideal—I don’t care whether you’re talking about the Chinese or Japanese or Vietnamese or whatever—the soups that they make, you’re going to see the carrot, that’s a carrot, that’s a pea, that’s a—you’re going to see all the components. It’s blended in another way. It’s still very tasty, it’s marvelous, but, it’s a different ideal. The French ideal is emulsifying it, making it look all the same. The Asian ideal that you
find in many Asian cultures is that you retain the appearances of the components but yet those flavors blend in a certain way.

Wilmot: Okay.

Wilson: Okay. The analogy is this: the string quartet, all the strings sound smooth, they are all part of the string family. But in the African ideal of sound where you have a bell, a rattle, a drum, and you have an Aretha Franklin type voice that doesn’t blend with anybody. You have the rattle, you have the drum, you have the bells. The bells, they congeal, but not in the same way. You hear each component sound. Rather than a homogenous texture, a smooth texture that’s all the same, it’s a heterogeneous texture where each individual sound is different. That’s what I meant by this “heterogeneous sound ideal” being an ideal that you find as a basic concept that you find in much African music and African American music. So, the heterogeneous concept: the continuity from speech to sound, another preconceived notion that informs the music. And the heterogeneous concept, just to articulate this again, you notice in African American vocalists, you notice musicians talk about their sound: Aretha Franklin sounds like Aretha Franklin, I don’t care where you put her, she’s not going to blend, She’s going to jump out at you. James Brown sounds like James Brown. Louis Armstrong with that rasply voice [imitates voice], his voice doesn’t even sound like a regular voice; he sounds like he doesn’t even have a voice. The Miles Davis sound, the Charlie Parker sound, each individual singer has a sound. But ideally, if you hear an African part, you can still hear individual voices. In a gospel choir, you can hear individual voices. It blends, but you also, you can hear each voice on a very individual level.

Wilmot: Do you carry both of these approaches to your composing?

Wilson: Well, see, I’m talking in an analytical sense now as the person who stands back and looks at a phenomena and tries to understand it and comes up with these ideas. As a composer, you’re trying to reach inside, you’re trying to get to that magical part of making sounds, sounds that affect people, sounds that are meaningful. So that, though I am a product of everything I know, and maybe on a subconscious level, I do this, but I’m not consciously saying, “I’ve got to use the heterogeneous sound ideal.” I’m saying “I want to make this music work,” and if the heterogeneous sound ideal works in this context then—O.K. On the other hand, I’ve got all this Western music, it’s the W.E.B. DuBois phenomena. “Double consciousness,” as an African American I know all this stuff about the African side and the African American side because I’ve studied it. Even if I hadn’t studied it, I’ve experienced it. I’ve also experienced the Euro-American tradition, so when I write music I’m thinking about how do I make this piece work? And I cannot consciously turn off one and turn on the other. But I think I’m doing a synthesis as I step out of the creative side and start thinking in the analytical side. I think, “Oh yeah, that’s like this.” And occasionally there will be a case, like the piece that you heard.
Wilmot: Is this the one with Mary Lovelace O’Neal?

Wilson: O’Neal, yeah. Mary Lovelace O’Neal, that particular piece—I mention that because it’s something you’ve heard recently—in the end of that piece, and in that movement, “The abundant blue light of Paris.” Then I’m thinking, that brings back the whole history of the twenties to me, that brings back Josephine Baker, all those Black expatriates, all of that.

Wilmot: Yes, you said that.

Wilson: For me, that means a certain thing, so then I’m tapping into something in a special way. But even there, at that particular moment, I’m not necessarily choosing this note as opposed to that note. I know the overall thing I want to do, but I can’t think about the source. I’m thinking, “How does this make sense?” Part of it making sense is the internal logic that’s there. But when I’m dealing with that I’m trying to make a statement, a statement that’s not contrived. There’s a difference between something that’s contrived—

Wilmot: A theoretical framework and something that’s creative.

Wilson: And something that seems to be logical.

Wilmot: I’ve heard several of your pieces now, and sometimes I find that the references to—and I’m still focused on the spiritual tradition mostly because it is someplace that we said we’d go—

Wilson: Sure.

Wilmot: And it seems to me to be very central in your work. Sometimes the references to the spiritual tradition are very oblique and sometimes they are explicit. I’m really intrigued by that, how you take a musical structure in one and make it either explicit or completely implicit and kind of hidden. Sometimes, it’s something maybe that only you know. Sometimes it’s something that is very clear. I’m intrigued by that range and the mechanics of that.

Wilson: I think it has to do with the notion of artifice and art. That is, I think in spite of everything I’ve said, fundamentally I’m an artist living at the end of the twentieth century in a Western culture. And yet my interpretation of Western culture is a little bit different, because my experience is a little bit different. But fundamentally what I seek to do is to express something of my experience as an artist, which I think, in some ways, is very, very different than if I had grown up in a small village in Africa, and I had been a traditional musician. I think what I do, although I’m expressing something of my experience, I’m also historically conscious of the whole way of building, a whole way of making things. I think that affects what I do. Part of that is I want to affect consciousness, I want to affect you as a listener, I want you to think about it, I want you to come back to the piece over and over again and ideally, in the
greatest sense, I want to change your life. I want to change your understanding of what life is about. That’s a Western concept, really, it is. On the other hand, I also know that there are other ways of making art, of making music, of affecting you which don’t necessarily say that consciously, but attempt to do that and do that in a different way. But because I’ve got both going on, I think sometimes as I’m creating something, I’m trying to do something that’s going to be more than—I guess that pulls together both. That pulls together both in such a way that it says in the range of experiences, you’re going to have some things that are very subtle, you’re going to have some things that are very overt, and you’re going to have a range of things in between, and that if I can take you on this journey with this piece, where some of the things you know are happening, you’re experiencing them very directly, some of the things you say, yeah, that makes sense, but why does that exist? Why does that happen that way?

I think about two things. Another common aspect of African American music, and also African American culture is this whole notion of signifying, this whole notion of referring back and giving you something that you’ve heard before but in a new way. So you have structurally a lot of forms in African American culture that are very traditional like the blues form. Another aspect that we talked about, or that we could talk about, is call and response where one statement answers a previous statement. Blues form is a reflection of that idea: A A, B B, statement statement, answer answer, where the answer fulfills the ideas of something before. But see, you do that in a lot of different ways. And one of the things that I think all artists do, whether it’s traditional artists or cultivated artists, or artists who have been influenced by post Renaissance European ideas, is the idea that change, continuity and change are important. Continuity with the past because that reinforces who you are and what you are. But also change is important because it is something that is different, something that’s unique, something that sort of perks your ear up because you’ve heard a thousand times people do certain licks, but if you do the lick in a different way, in a different context, then it has meaning. You deal with the essence of music meaning.

I don’t think I’ve talked about this with you. But when we talk about communication in music, how do you know that you’ve communicated? Well, communication in any medium only exists if the person gets the same idea that you’re planning to send forth. So the classic way of demonstrating this is to have—I always remember this because I like this image—if a person says something to you and you understand what they say, if I say, “I’m going to the store,” and you say, “Okay, buy me something,” or whatever. If somebody makes a gesture—and the classic case I like is this one: you walk into the room and there’s a beautiful woman or a beautiful or handsome man sitting at the other side, and you wink at the person or you smile, and you wink and then they smile and they wink back, then you’ve got some communication occurring and that’s something. This person likes your countenance and this person likes the fact that you like their countenance, so they’re winking back.
So, there’s some communication that comes into play here. But what happens if a person walks into the room and you look at them, they blink their eyes, and you say, “They’re winking at you,” but they really weren’t winking at you, they were just blinking their eyes because maybe the sun was blinding them. They blink your eyes and then you blink back and suddenly they’re wondering, “Why is this person blinking their eyes?” There’s no communication, or there’s some communication, but maybe it’s negative communication. They aren’t really getting what you intended. Or you interpret something that they did as something else.

Similar things happen in music. You set up expectations and you fulfill them or you don’t fulfill them because music exists in sound. It’s a communicative art. If you sing [sings] “do re me fa so la ti,” and stop there, most people there aren’t going to be happy. They want you to sing, “do re me fa so la ti do.” And you get the fulfillment of that because after the note “ti,” it leaves you hanging and you want to hear “do.” That’s learned because they know that’s a scale and that every time you have the note “ti,” you’ve got to have “do” in some guise or something. If you don’t do that “do,” then they’re going to “Wait a minute,” they feel uneasy. So you’re communicating something, they expect something to happen and you don’t fulfill that expectation. So one way of thinking about music is setting up a series of expectations and fulfilling them and not fulfilling them. Another way of thinking about that is fulfilling them and not fulfilling them can be so elaborate, and so interesting that you’re so fulfilled by this that you jump up and say, “Great! Their way of fulfilling that “ti” going to “do” is so elaborate that it suddenly gave me a totally new dimension on what that “ti” relationship was to “do.” So [sings] “do re mi fa so la ti, dee dee da yah, da da da di di da da, da daah-do.” [claps] And then you say, “Oh, my gosh! What a nice elaboration of that “ti” going to “do.” In that case, people are following and listening, they know that you are going to go to “do,” but you didn’t go to “do” right away. You did all these other things. That’s a very simplistic way of demonstrating, but that is meaning because it communicates something to you.

So all those things are going on in music all the time, and what you choose to do and how you choose to do it makes it more or less fulfilling. We talk about depth in music. Some things are very simple, very straightforward, “Okay, yeah, it’s clichéd,” and you know what’s going to happen as in literature or anything else, all the clichés, all the characters are in a certain way, they aren’t fully drawn. The same thing is true in music. You always know it’s going to work that way and it’s no big deal. Then you have someone who comes along does something that’s so ingenious, “Oh, Wow, that’s really great,” and you want to hear it again, “How are they going to do it?”

Wilmot: And it still communicates with you or it shows you a new language.

Wilson: Exactly, a new way of doing it. So that becomes very exciting or very fulfilling.
Wilmot: When you think of that is there one piece that you think of that you put in that category?

Wilson: You mean in terms of my own music? It’s hard to think of one piece. There are a lot of pieces. There are certain pieces that if you ask me, “What are your favorite pieces, what are the pieces that you are most proud of?” I guess it depends on the time of the day, but among the pieces that I always mention are Sometimes for electronic tape and voice because every time I hear that, from an emotional point of view, I feel a cathartic sense every time I hear that piece. Aspects of Spirit Song. Spirit Song is another thing. But Sinfonia is a piece that I usually discuss when I’m talking about my music, I’ll usually play that piece somewhere. But then sometimes, I’ll play a later piece like a Visions of Truth for the singers and chamber orchestra. I’m thinking about that piece a lot now because I’m thinking about the Chicago Symphony piece. There are parts of the Chicago piece that I did several years ago, Hold On. Even this latest piece, there are parts. I got a lot of response from this latest piece that I did, partially because some of the aspects of it were more straightforward. And people—like the second movement with the trumpet solo is clearly more immediate. But also I think that it fit the picture in certain ways, people could see that The Abundant Blue Light of Paris, you know. And yet, there are other pieces that I like also.

Wilmot: I have one more question, I think, for you today. This has to do with—you’re someone who uses voice in your work, in this amazing way you use voice and not everyone does that. How do you choose the type of voice you want to use?

Wilson: Well, it depends. Sometimes, like in the case of the piece Sometimes—that was a choice because I wanted to do a spiritual. I told you about William Brown. I heard him sing, this guy is about my age, he understands the spiritual in a really profound way and I wanted to use him and that voice was part of the basic conception. Literally, I brought him out to Berkeley, I recorded his voice, and then I used his voice in making the piece electronically.

In other instances—I did a piece, Spirit Song, a piece that the Oakland Symphony commissioned years ago. I wanted to use a soprano voice because I wanted in some way to reflect something about the history of the spiritual, but I wanted to use a single female voice because of the sound of it, and I wanted a soprano because I wanted her voice to be able to float and soar in a very special kind of way.

Now the piece that I’m doing now for Chicago—I should be doing it now but I’m thinking about now—the voices are part of the ensemble. It’s a tenor voice, a soprano voice, and a baritone voice. So that was sort of a natural kind of thing to use. Also, when I was doing that piece A Visions of Truth, I was writing a piece about African American men and their reaction to life in America. So music, I used the spiritual “I’ve been ‘Buked and I’ve been Scorned.” I made up a lullaby— “Mama’s little brown baby/Mama’s little
brown baby,” very simple words, but a lullaby that was like a spiritual, and then I used a Claude McKay poem, “If We Must Die.” With that rephrase “Pressed to the wall, dying, but fighting back!” That whole business about fighting back. “Let us die like men,” that kind of thing. In that case, I wanted to use men’s voices, but I wanted it to be leavened by female voices. Usually it has to do with the poem itself and whatever texts I get and what seems to be right for that particular text.

Wilmot: I guess I was intrigued by the idea of voice as instrument.

Wilson: Right, and then the voice as instrument, and instrument as voice. That’s again another one of these conceptual approaches to music where it’s related to the heterogeneous sound ideal, where you have a lot of disparate kinds of sounds that you’ve used, and also you have a whole dialogue between voice and instrument, instrument and voice. And instruments are used like a voice and a voice is used like an instrument. So that sort of cuts across that.

Wilmot: Olly, I have one last question for you, which is how has this oral history process been for you?

Wilson: It’s been great, it’s been great. It forced me to reflect and think about things in the past. It gave me an opportunity to talk a lot which I love to do. [laughs] It also gave me an opportunity to share ideas with people. You’ve been a great interviewer, both you and Caroline have been great interviewers and asked the right kind of questions which got me going and so forth, and I really enjoy that. And the idea that there will be an oral history project—nobody’s going to live forever, nobody’s going to be around always—

Wilmot: The idea that there’s a document.

Wilson: The idea that there’s a document is important because it reflects your thoughts, your sentiments of a particular time. Let’s face it, you forget those sometimes. It’s important to think about what you thought at a certain point. Related to this is the idea that people often think about the time in which they live. I’ll always remember this quote from A Tale of Two Cities, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” and you think, “Yes, that’s true.”

I think about my own lifetime and I think about how I was born in 1937. I lived to a new century, but most of my life has been the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of a new century. And in my lifetime, from a social point of view, I’ve seen tremendous changes in this country. As an artist I’ve been able to reflect on those changes and to think about that. It’s hard when you look back and you think about things in the previous century, let’s say, people born in 1837. An African American person born in 1837, let’s say in the United States. That’s a hell of a time to live. You’re still in slavery, at least the majority of people of African descent were still in slavery. Then you look at 1904, and of course when I think of 1904, it triggers certain things. I think
of Booker T. Washington’s famous speech in 1904, which was at once accommodationist, saying we can be as separate as the fingers, but yet—

Wilmot: Put down the anchor.

Wilson: Then also to give Booker T. his rights, after all, he was trying to do something, establishing Tuskegee and trying to develop self-sufficiency. But I also agree more profoundly with W.E.B. DuBois about the importance of you have to do both. You cannot give up your rights, or the ideal of your rights. You have to press forward with that, and never make the accommodation.

I’ve seen some changes and I’ve reflected on those changes and perhaps contributed to a lasting legacy of what that meant and what people thought about that. If that, in any way, influences or helps to crystallize what life was like at least for part of human kind’s existence, and for the progeny of all of us, that’s important. And that’s one of the reasons why I always am so elated to discover that in my own way, I’ve been an artist, I’ve been a person who’s tried to document what was going on in their time and reflect upon that through the work that I did. And that maybe brings life and meaning to people in the future or a people in the present who listen to that and say, “Hey, that’s sort of like I feel.” That’s important if you can touch somebody else in any way. I think that becomes very, very important to being alive.

[End of Interview 11]