

Richard Wyatt, Jr.

Richard Wyatt, Jr.: A Blessed Life of Art and Music

Getty Trust Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes
in 2023

Interviews sponsored by the J. Paul Getty Trust

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Richard Wyatt, Jr., (right) and his wife, Joyce Wyatt, c. 1980s.



Left to right: Richard Wyatt, Jr.; Carroll Greene; and Claude Booker at the opening of *A Panorama of Black Artists* at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1972.



Left to right: Richard Wyatt, Jr.; Johnny Gill; and Freddie Perren in the recording studio, c. 1980s.



Richard Wyatt, Jr., and Bonnie Raitt in front of his in-progress mural *Hollywood Jazz: 1945–1972* on the Capitol Records Building, c. 1990.



Detail of Richard Wyatt, Jr.'s mural *Spike Lee Project* at Spike's Joint West, 1991.



City of Dreams, River of History mural by Richard Wyatt, Jr., Eastern Lobby of Union Station, 1996. This mural was part of a larger collaboration with artist May Sun and architect Paul Diez.



Image of *Ripple of Hope: Robert F. Kennedy Inspiration Park* (site of the former Ambassador Hotel), Richard Wyatt, Jr., and May Sun, 2005–2010.

Abstract

Richard Wyatt, Jr., is an artist whose work includes drawings, paintings, installations, and public art. Wyatt was born in Lynwood, California, in 1955, and has lived in the Los Angeles area his whole life. He began his art career early, winning the Watts Chalk-In at twelve years old, and then studying at the Watts Towers Art Center, the Chouinard Art Institute, and the Tutor/Art Program with artist Charles White. Wyatt attended the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where he earned a BFA in art. Some of his best-known work in Los Angeles includes the mural *Hollywood Jazz: 1945–1972* on the Capitol Records Building; the mural *City of Dreams, River of History* in Union Station; and the installation *Ripple of Hope* at Robert F. Kennedy Inspiration Park. Wyatt taught drawing and painting at the University of California, Irvine; the Otis Art Institute; and the Watts Towers Art Center. He also had a career as a songwriter, writing songs for musicians like The Sylvers and New Edition. In this interview, Wyatt discusses his childhood in the Los Angeles Area, including family and early education; early arts education, including at the Chouinard Art Institute, Studio Watts Workshop, and the Tutor/Art Program; early teachers and mentors, including Charles White, John Riddle, George Evans, and Bill Pajaud; teaching art, including students and art exercises; songwriting career, including musicians, songs, and work with songwriters like Freddie and Christine Yarian Perren; collaborations with artist May Sun; marriage and children; creative process and preparation for work, including historical research, music, and working with models; shows, including *Panorama of Black Artists*, *Visions of a Spirit*, and *Black American Portraits*; paintings and drawings, including *E.J. Johnson* and *Woman with Roses*; murals, including *The Muralists*, *Hollywood Jazz*, and *Cecil* on the Watts Towers Art Center; *City of Dreams, River of History* in Union Station; *People Coming, People Going* in the Wilshire/Western Metro Red Line Subway Station; *Ripple of Hope* installation at Robert F. Kennedy Inspiration Park; reflections on commissions and public art; business of art and racism in the art world; collectors and gallery representation; and reflections on his art career.

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Interview 1: February 6, 2023

01-00:00:00

Tewes: This is a first interview with Richard Wyatt, Jr., for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes on February 6, 2023 in Los Angeles, California. Bridget, go ahead and take us from here.

01-00:00:22

Cooks: Thanks, Amanda. So, Richard, we're just so grateful that you have allowed us all this time with you. [laughs]

01-00:00:29

Wyatt: My pleasure. It's really my pleasure.

01-00:00:32

Cooks: There is *so* much to talk about. And the first question that we ask all of our subjects is: when and where were you born?

01-00:00:41

Wyatt: I was born in 1955 in Lynwood, California, which is close to Compton, California—which is where I grew up, actually. So as the old song goes, I was "born and raised in Compton" [laughs] up until 1971, but I was born actually in Lynwood, California, at St. Francis Hospital.

01-00:01:07

Cooks: Okay. And what was Compton like? What kind of neighborhood, what kind of people lived in Compton at that time?

01-00:01:15

Wyatt: At that time, it was a regular neighborhood. We had a lot of families there, both parents in the home, working class area. There were a few white folks there, up until a certain time, before it started getting more African American, and then eventually Latino and then Samoan, you know? And so it was like a lot of diversity there, yeah. But during that whole period of time, it was exciting for me, because I had a lot of family in the area. My father's brother and sister lived in Compton, so we had a lot of cousins there, and then we had a lot of cousins on my grandmother's side, as well. Their cousins moved there, too, so we were all there, you know, at some point in time, yeah. And well, for instance, I had a cousin that lived in Richland Farms, which, you know, they ride horses and everything. So it would be nothing to be driving down a street and see somebody riding a horse, you know? [laughs and imitates holding reins] Yeah, it was a close-knit community.

01-00:02:33

Cooks: Did you ride horses?

01-00:02:34

Wyatt: No, I didn't.

- 01-00:02:35
Cooks: A cousin—no, okay.
- 01-00:02:36
Wyatt: No, no, no, no. My cousin, [Abe Feltus], he had a 4-H Club, actually, and he was really kind of inspirational to a lot of the kids there to join 4-H. And they entered cows and pigs in fairs. You know, it was a really good thing for them.
- 01-00:02:55
Cooks: And what kind of work did your family do? What did your father do?
- 01-00:03:00
Wyatt: My mom was a stay-at-home mom, because most mothers were during that time, which in about the fifties, '55, around there. And my dad worked for the Los Angeles Unified School District as a tree trimmer, so he trimmed trees all over the place, you know? But in fact, a lot of times he would have pieces of wood that he thought that maybe Dale Davis would want it, or Charles Dickson, and he would put them in the back of his truck and drop it off to them, you know? [laughs] That was his gig. And he did work on the side. In fact, I used to work sometimes, as a kid, on Saturdays with him and learned a lot of stuff about tree trimming and how to, you know, sweep up the brush.
- 01-00:03:49
Cooks: So Dale and Charles were artists—are artists. But did your father know them directly, or did he know their family first?
- 01-00:04:01
Wyatt: Oh no, no, he knew them directly.
- 01-00:04:02
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-00:04:03
Wyatt: You know, because of the art. Well, I don't want to get too far ahead, but I really got into artwork after winning the Watts Chalk-In in 1968.
- 01-00:04:13
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-00:04:15
Wyatt: So I don't know if I'm going too far there or—
- 01-00:04:16
Cooks: Well, but that's when your family started to know some of your peers.
- 01-00:04:21
Wyatt: Exactly.
- 01-00:04:22
Cooks: Okay.

- 01-00:04:22
Wyatt: The first artist that I met was John Outterbridge.
- 01-00:04:24
Cooks: Wow, okay.
- 01-00:04:26
Wyatt: And I later had the opportunity to work with him at the Watts Towers Art Center, and I actually did a tribute to him as part of a murals series that I did for the Compton Unified School District. It was pretty exciting, because I met a lot of people, I mean, at an early age, you know? John Outterbridge; Curtis Tann, who was the director; Noah Purifoy.
- 01-00:04:55
Cooks: Right. Yeah, I love that part of your story that I know already is about family and community, and it's just wonderful to hear how this started so early. When did your parents come to California?
- 01-00:05:13
Wyatt: Let's see, my dad, I think he was born here, but my mom and her brother came to California years ago. I can't give you the exact date, but they were kids. Because my grandfather had lost his wife, and he took it kind of hard. So my mother's grandmother here went back and brought them back here, the mother and the brother, here.
- 01-00:05:44
Cooks: Where were they?
- 01-00:05:45
Wyatt: They were in Memphis, Tennessee.
- 01-00:05:46
Cooks: In Tennessee! Oh okay.
- 01-00:05:49
Wyatt: Yeah. And interesting story about that. We used to love going back there during that whole period of time, in the sixties. I remember watching TV with my grandmother, and we were watching—it was some kind of documentary, and Elvis Presley popped up. And she said, "Oh, there's our Elvis!" And so like, "Grandma, you act like you—" [she] said, "Yeah, your grandfather used to drive trucks with him." [laughs] He kept in contact with him from when he got famous and everything else. They used to go to church with him.
- 01-00:06:27
Cooks: Really?
- 01-00:06:27
Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah. [laughs]
- 01-00:06:32
Cooks: Wow.

- 01-00:06:32
Wyatt: It's almost like *Forrest Gump*, you know? [laughs]
- 01-00:06:36
Cooks: That you know all these different people through time and history. There's all these connections.
- 01-00:06:40
Wyatt: Yeah, right. So that's how they—my mom and her brother—got here. And then my dad came from—well, my grandmother and her husband met, and they got married in Kansas City, and so they came from there to here. They traveled in one of those old model Fords, and it broke down. Actually, he had to actually fix it. Back then the men and the women were very resourceful, and they really knew how to get stuff done. And if they had to make it, they'd have all the parts. Like for instance, the car parts, my grandfather made sure he had them all, you know? And they camped out back in the desert when they were getting to California, and they actually shot a rabbit and they ate, you know? [laughs]
- 01-00:07:37
Cooks: Wow.
- 01-00:07:38
Wyatt: You know, it was pretty serious. But they got here, and my father was actually born here.
- 01-00:07:43
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-00:07:44
Wyatt: And he grew up on Fiftieth [St.] off Central, in South Central, and then he went to Jefferson High School. Oh, I forget where my mom went to junior high school. But that's where they really became serious, [at Jefferson High School], because my dad was friends with her cousins, and they ran track. She was a year younger, and then he always says, "Well, one day she grew up." [laughs]
- 01-00:08:12
Cooks: Right. [laughs]
- 01-00:08:13
Wyatt: And so they start hanging out, and they fell in love. The first time that they wanted to get married, they were going to elope, and they were going to go to Arizona to do it. They wind up having a car accident, and the car actually flipped over and a whole bunch of stuff.
- 01-00:08:30
Cooks: Oh no!

- 01-00:08:30
Wyatt: Yeah, everybody walked away. But they knew then after that they were going to do—the next time, they were going to do it the right way—a wedding.
[laughs]
- 01-00:08:41
Cooks: That was a bad sign.
- 01-00:08:42
Wyatt: Yeah, exactly.
- 01-00:08:44
Cooks: Oh no, wow!
- 01-00:08:44
Wyatt: Yeah, not to do it that way, you know, but have a sort of traditional wedding. And it worked out great, because they had a really nice wedding.
- 01-00:08:52
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-00:08:53
Wyatt: In fact, they just celebrated their sixty-ninth wedding anniversary last September, and I put it on my Instagram page, from their wedding.
- 01-00:09:04
Cooks: Oh okay. I have to look that up. Sixty-nine years!
- 01-00:09:07
Wyatt: Sixty-nine years, yeah.
- 01-00:09:10
Cooks: Wow!
- 01-00:09:10
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 01-00:09:11
Cooks: What a great model.
- 01-00:09:12
Wyatt: Yeah. So that's how they met. Once they got married the right way, they stayed with my grandmother, my father's mother, and saved up enough money, and then they bought the place in Compton in [1954]. Because my father's older brother—not the oldest, but the older brother—he was already living there, so he was sort of like a trailblazer for moving to Compton.
- 01-00:09:44
Cooks: There was a family connection there, and then a lot of family came there eventually, okay.

- 01-00:09:48
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah. We have a lot of family there.
- 01-00:09:51
Cooks: Wow.
- 01-00:09:54
Wyatt: Affectionately, we called Compton a "suburb of Watts" back then, you know?
[laughs]
- 01-00:09:59
Cooks: Yeah, wow. Yeah, that's terrific, and it's great to know that family history. I assumed that your dad had migrated from somewhere else, but that he was here already, that—
- 01-00:10:15
Wyatt: Oh yeah.
- 01-00:10:16
Cooks: Your LA roots are really deep.
- 01-00:10:17
Wyatt: Right, yeah. There was a story that my grandmother tells—and my dad actually did a really brilliant thing. He sat my grandmother, his mother, on her front porch on Fiftieth St. and just had her talk about her history. I've got it on tape, so I listen to it every now and then when I want to hear her voice. But yeah, I just learned so much stuff, you know, where her mother, [Anna Ford], was actually a slave, and she escaped three or four times, until she finally did eventually escape. Each time she escaped, the guy would beat her [with a barrel hoop] and cut her hair. So she finally got away, you know, and she wound up in Kansas City. She was just sitting on a curb, and this lady [named Dora] came up, saw her in need. [Dora, moved by compassion, took Anna in] and raised her from then and there. And when she got old enough, she married and had my grandmother, which is my father's mother.
- 01-00:11:23
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-00:11:24
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 01-00:11:26
Cooks: Wow, yeah, this is a terrific story. And so did you have brothers and sisters? You were the first child?
- 01-00:11:35
Wyatt: Yeah, I was the first child, and I have a younger sister two years younger than me named Robin [Wyatt-Yip]. She went to all the schools I went to, except for junior high school. [laughs] I went to Vanguard Junior High School in Compton. Then eventually, they opened a new school called Benjamin O. Davis, and it wasn't—they didn't have books or anything, so my parents

decided we've got to move, because the education was pretty good in Compton, up to that point. I mean, my elementary school teacher, Evelyn Freeman, was the one that told my parents about, you know, "I think your son is talented and you should really encourage it, encourage him." And they acted on that, and it worked out.

01-00:12:24

Cooks: And what grade was that?

01-00:12:26

Wyatt: You know, I think it was fourth, but when I talked to her, she said, "No, it's third," so I'm going to side with her. [laughs] Because she's like mid-nineties, I suppose, now, [and very lucid].

01-00:12:35

Cooks: Really?

01-00:12:35

Wyatt: Yeah.

01-00:12:36

Cooks: And you—

01-00:12:37

Wyatt: And she was an excellent teacher. I mean, she was like a really good teacher. She had an appreciation for music. And she actually was a musician, a pianist, but she would play all kinds of music for us. And she was really like a real kind of a renaissance woman, and a really good educator, as well, too.

01-00:12:58

Cooks: And you still keep in touch with her?

01-00:12:59

Wyatt: Yeah, I do, from time to time.

01-00:13:01

Cooks: Richard, this is kind of exceptional.

01-00:13:03

Wyatt: Yeah. [laughs]

01-00:13:04

Cooks: I mean, your third-grade teacher, you still talk to.

01-00:13:07

Wyatt: Yeah. Not all the time, but I do. Like for instance, the last time I talked to her was when the Charles White show, the retrospective was happening. I gave her a book and signed it to her, and wrote a really nice letter thanking her for, you know, for looking out, yeah. She said, "Oh, oh, your writing is so good!" I said, "Well, I learned from the best, you know?" [laughs]

01-00:13:33

Cooks: You've had time to practice.

01-00:13:36

Wyatt: Yeah. But I would say at nine years old, I went to this library—another interesting program, all kind of paths cross—I went to this library in Compton. It's called the Enterprise Library. I asked the librarian back then if there were any Negro artists, you know? Because that's what it was back then. And she says, "No, there aren't in here, but come back tomorrow and I'll bring you my own book." And so she brought this beautiful book, and I saw Elizabeth Catlett, Jacob Lawrence, Romare Bearden. And then I turned a page to Charles White, and that did it; that's when I decided to become an artist, right then and there. I turned the page. And I found out later on that that librarian is an aunt to Alonzo and Dale Davis, [Louise Jane Moses].

01-00:14:27

Cooks: It's such a small community.

01-00:14:28

Wyatt: Yeah, it really is, yeah.

01-00:14:31

Cooks: Wow! And so I think Dale and Alonzo mentioned her. They mentioned that when they came here—because they were in Alabama, they were at Tuskegee.

01-00:14:43

Wyatt: Right.

01-00:14:45

Cooks: And yeah, there was an aunt here who was a librarian.

01-00:14:50

Wyatt: Yeah, that's the one.

01-00:14:49

Cooks: Well, that's incredible.

01-00:14:51

Wyatt: Yeah, it really is. I mean, I had no idea. I just know that she was the person that introduced me to African American artists, and especially Charles White. That did it for me.

01-00:15:04

Cooks: Do you remember what book that was?

01-00:15:08

Wyatt: Oh no.

01-00:15:10

Cooks: No. It had to have been a pretty new book at the time.

- 01-00:15:12
Wyatt: Yeah. I think if you see the film [by Matt Kresling], it's like a short for the Charles White exhibition—so *Life Model*—
- 01-00:15:27
Cooks: Yes, for the Charles White [exhibition]: *Life Model: Charles White and His Students*. Yes.
- 01-00:15:30
Wyatt: Yeah. I think the director, the guy who did the film, he used that book, [*American Negro Art* by Cedric Dover].
- 01-00:15:38
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-00:15:39
Wyatt: I think that's the book.
- 01-00:15:40
Cooks: That's so interesting.
- 01-00:15:42
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 01-00:15:42
Cooks: And so, Richard, you grew up, there were just the two of you. Can you tell us what kind of values were important in your house? What did your parents really emphasize for you both growing up?
- 01-00:15:56
Wyatt: Well you know, kind of like the same values that a lot of the families who lived in Compton shared. You know, education, family. When people think of Compton, they only think of crime, whatever and all. But it wasn't like that then. I mean, you had problems. But for instance, like when I went to junior high school, if you had a problem with somebody and you guys got into a fight or whatever, then they would send you to the principal's office. And then the principal would send you to the gym teacher, who would give you swats. And then you'd have to sign up to box on Friday after school. [laughs] And that was it! After the boxing was over, that was it. It was squashed, you could say.
- 01-00:16:43
Cooks: So you'd have a formal boxing match and then settle it? [laughs]
- 01-00:16:47
Wyatt: Yeah. You know, it wasn't like round one or two, it was just, it's like three minutes or so. And then you got it all out, and then that was it. It was over, and you guys were like friends the next day, you know? It was all in the time period. [laughs] It really was.

01-00:17:03

Cooks: And it worked, and that was that.

01-00:17:06

Wyatt: Yeah, it really worked during that whole time. So the values there were really kind of—along with church, which relates to: my mom grew up in the church, and she used to play piano for her church. And my dad went to church, his [mother]. And so that was always a thing, you know, in our house. In fact, the guy who was the choir director was my godfather. I can remember him playing these beautiful chords as a kid. My parents said he would tap out these beats and everything [makes musical sounds] when I was a baby, and I could actually tap them back and everything.

01-00:17:44

Cooks: Really?

01-00:17:45

Wyatt: And I think it has a lot to do with my songwriting, because I could always hear music. I didn't learn how to read [music], but I always wind up making up my own songs. I remember we had a recital at this piano class I had, and I wind up making up my own song for my recital piece. And it was kind of a Robert Frost moment, too, because they sat down—I really wanted to do artwork, concentrate on artwork. And so I remember us all sitting down with the music teacher, "Yeah, he's really good," so and so. I said, "No, I really want to do art." So I made up my mind to do art, not knowing that I would eventually go back to music, creating and doing things.

01-00:18:34

Cooks: Did you have a piano in the house?

01-00:18:36

Wyatt: Yeah, we did.

01-00:18:36

Cooks: Oh, you did!

01-00:18:38

Wyatt: Just a regular upright piano. But I remember with my cousin, Donny Wyatt, who lives in Compton, as well, too. He could play piano and saxophone, everything. He taught me how to play my first song, and how to listen to music and chords and all that stuff. And so I really developed my ears during that time. Or I could hear like what strings would be doing. Once you've got the basic rhythm section, I could hear all this stuff, and I would put it down. When I eventually started producing my own stuff, writing and producing my own records for different artists, I could actually hear what parts go where. It was a blast, you know?

01-00:19:28

Cooks: Did you think everybody could do this?

- 01-00:19:30
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 01-00:19:30
Cooks: Did you know that you were special in that way?
- 01-00:19:33
Wyatt: No, I thought everybody could do it.
- 01-00:19:34
Cooks: Wow.
- 01-00:19:36
Wyatt: Yeah. And I never thought of myself as being special.
- 01-00:19:38
Cooks: Right.
- 01-00:19:39
Wyatt: I just thought of it as just something I really enjoy doing, so I pursued it.
- 01-00:19:44
Cooks: So—
- 01-00:19:45
Wyatt: It was a lot like painting. Music is like painting to me. In fact, I had an instructor who asked me who my favorite painter was, and I said McCoy Tyner. [laughs] Yeah. He was Joe Serious.
- 01-00:19:56
Cooks: And what did they say?
- 01-00:19:58
Wyatt: He couldn't figure it out. [laughs] It was at UCLA.
- 01-00:20:05
Cooks: And so of course, you know that that's a musician, but in your mind the two arts are so close to each other.
- 01-00:20:13
Wyatt: Yeah. The way I look at it, it's just a different medium. The way that I look at it, and the way that I go about creating something, whether it's music or visual art or whatever, it's almost like the same process, you know? So start with the basic structure in music, like just a song, then I get my bass player and guitar player. My guitar player is—I've known him, we were in groups back in junior high school—and he's doing really well now, too. In fact, if you heard that song by DeBarge, "All This Love." [That guitar solo is my friend, guitarist Charles Julian Fearing.]

01-00:20:58

Cooks:

I, this morning, Richard, I said, "I wonder if DeBarge is going to come up." I said that to myself today, because the genre of music when you were writing and producing, that was when that was so popular and just—

01-00:21:12

Wyatt:

Yeah. Well, that one particular song, "All This Love," my buddy Charles Fearing, who played guitar, he played the acoustic solo in that. And he played on all my stuff. I wouldn't even have to tell him what to do. He would just listen to the track and just come in and—[laughs]

01-00:21:30

Cooks:

And just know.

01-00:21:31

Wyatt:

And know exactly where, because we knew kind of where to go. And the same process, I apply the same process when I do collaborative works in art, too, because one of my main collaborators is May Sun. We've done a few projects, and we go back to UCLA days, so yeah.

01-00:21:51

Cooks:

Okay, we're going to come back to this, and I'm going to come back to your youth a bit. But is it true that—even though just now, when we're talking about you when you're a little older in your creative process—is it true that that kind of existed for you since the beginning?

01-00:22:12

Wyatt:

Like I said, once I saw the Charles White work, I knew that I wanted to be an artist, and so that sensibility just never went away. I just always had that compulsion just to do work, you know?

01-00:22:31

Cooks:

So, Richard, can you just break down what happened? Like what was it about looking at Charles White's work that changed your life forever?

01-00:22:43

Wyatt:

Well, first of all, the technical [aspect], I mean, it was just incredible. And then the imagery that he was doing. These are drawings, when I saw his work the first time. Well I say, just the technical, his mark making was just incredible, and so that hit me. But then, the images themselves as a whole—subject matter along with technique and everything—that really struck me and got me, because these images looked like people I knew, people I grew up with, people in my family, you know? And so that really had a major impact on my own practice.

01-00:23:31

Cooks:

And at that time, when you saw his work, you had already been drawing, and did you feel like, I can do it, or, One day I want to be able to do this?

- 01-00:23:45
Wyatt: I always felt like I could do it.
- 01-00:23:45
Cooks: Wow.
- 01-00:23:47
Wyatt: Yeah, at an early age. [laughs] I mean, when you've got kids growing up in junior high school—because I was in junior high school when that Watts Chalk-In hit and everything—when you have your peers telling you that, "Man, this is good," you know, and really getting behind it, it was, in a sense, a lot of validation in terms of where I wanted to go. And in my approach. I didn't know at that time, but in my own approach to how I saw things. And I wanted to represent the images, so it was figurative work.
- 01-00:24:29
Cooks: Okay. So you went to Tibby Elementary School.
- 01-00:24:33
Wyatt: Yes.
- 01-00:24:34
Cooks: In Compton.
- 01-00:24:35
Wyatt: Right up the street, right around the corner. We walked to it. [laughs]
- 01-00:24:39
Cooks: And that's where you had this teacher who said, "Everybody does art, but Richard's at a whole other level."
- 01-00:24:46
Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- 01-00:24:48
Cooks: Okay. How did your parents respond to that?
- 01-00:24:51
Wyatt: They responded good, because they started supporting it, you know, which is really good. I was fortunate, because I don't know if every parent would have done that. They would have said, "Well you know, this is nice, but Thrifty's is hiring." [laughs]
- 01-00:25:08
Cooks: Right, the Post Office is hiring.
- 01-00:25:09
Wyatt: Yeah, right! Yeah.
- 01-00:25:09
Cooks: Right, okay.

- 01-00:25:11
Wyatt: Yeah. My parents were pretty unique, though, anyway, because they were both into music and they sung right out of the church.
- 01-00:25:18
Cooks: Oh, they both sang, also?
- 01-00:25:19
Wyatt: Yeah. My dad, in fact, he sung, for years, with the Albert McNeil [Jubilee] Singers.
- 01-00:25:27
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-00:25:27
Wyatt: Yeah, and they went all over the world singing. So I grew up in a house that was full of music. When I woke up in the morning, there was music playing.
- 01-00:25:38
Cooks: So jazz, gospel, radio.
- 01-00:25:42
Wyatt: You name it, it was all there.
- 01-00:25:46
Cooks: Did your dad, did he travel before you were born? Or did you—
- 01-00:25:51
Wyatt: Oh no, no, this is well after.
- 01-00:25:52
Cooks: Oh, well after.
- 01-00:25:53
Wyatt: When I was in my teens, yeah, when I was in my teens. But they did sing a lot when I was a kid. You know, that's my remembrance of music being in the house.
- 01-00:26:05
Cooks: Wow.
- 01-00:26:07
Wyatt: Hearing all these beautiful chords, and it would just stick with me.
- 01-00:26:11
Cooks: And was your sister musical as a child, too? Or just—
- 01-00:26:15
Wyatt: Yeah. I mean, she played, like she was a first chair playing violin and all that stuff. But she wasn't really that interested in music. She was really interested in acting. She was more outgoing than I was. She was really extroverted, yeah. [laughs]

- 01-00:26:34
Cooks: Okay. And then you went to Vanguard Middle School, which is in Compton.
- 01-00:26:38
Wyatt: Right.
- 01-00:26:40
Cooks: So these schools in Compton, it's the same demographics as your neighbors. Your cousins went to school with you, and—
- 01-00:26:48
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah. I mean, I have cousins that went to Compton High School and Centennial High School. Vanguard was really, really a good school at the time. I learned Spanish there—I mean, enough to get by. But you know, I get it at that age, and I had a really good Spanish teacher. It was good. And I had drafting class and art classes. It was pretty exciting, because the kids were so diverse within the community. We had some kids that were athletes and some kids that were scholars, like always.
- 01-00:27:35
Cooks: And then you went to John Burroughs [Middle School], which is a totally different neighborhood, a totally different look. So did your family move?
- 01-00:27:43
Wyatt: Yeah, we moved—
- 01-00:27:43
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-00:27:44
Wyatt: Okay, this is what actually happened. We went to JB, to John Burroughs, but we were still living in Compton at the time. I started going to John Burroughs the second semester of my ninth-grade year, and then we moved in 1971 to here, to LA. But we would like commute; my dad would take us, get us up early in the morning, take us to school, and pick us up. Or we'd catch the bus back for about, I think, around—started in junior high school—for about a couple years, maybe. So it was a big sacrifice. And then we finally moved here, and it wasn't such a burden.
- 01-00:28:32
Cooks: For sure. And do you remember why John Burroughs, why your parents picked that—or maybe you picked John Burroughs?
- 01-00:28:40
Wyatt: Well, no, no, they picked it, because it was a good school, a really good school.
- 01-00:28:45
Cooks: And they're known for their music program.

- 01-00:28:46
Wyatt: Yeah, I don't know about then, but this is like 1970, back then. But they were just academically a really, really good school, and the kids were really smart, and the kids were really cool. It was in the heart of the Jewish community.
- 01-00:29:02
Cooks: Yes. And—
- 01-00:29:03
Wyatt: The transition was like seamless for—
- 01-00:29:06
Cooks: Really?
- 01-00:29:07
Wyatt: —for going there. Yeah. Oh, it was cool. I've got friends to this day who went to JB and Fairfax [High School].
- 01-00:29:16
Cooks: Were you known as the artist?
- 01-00:29:18
Wyatt: Yep. [laughs]
- 01-00:29:18
Cooks: Yeah. [laughs]
- 01-00:29:20
Wyatt: Always the artist. [laughs] Even to this day, you know, the artist to my friends.
- 01-00:29:27
Cooks: Did you ever do things, art projects, for the school or for plays, like backdrops or—
- 01-00:29:35
Wyatt: Yeah, actually it's funny you should say that. When I was in, I think fourth grade, I actually did some painting for backdrops for a play, and I remember this clearly as if it just happened yesterday. Because my mom, she came up to the school and she said, "I was worried about where you—" "No, I was painting the background." She says, "That's okay, just let me know." Because I lost track of time, you know? [laughs]
- 01-00:30:07
Cooks: Oh wow!
- 01-00:30:09
Wyatt: Not so much at Vanguard, but when I got to John Burroughs, I did these big pieces in the art class for junior high school. And then the teachers from other schools started really noticing me.

- 01-00:30:26
Cooks: From other schools?
- 01-00:30:27
Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And so by the time I got to Fairfax, it was kind of a done deal: I was in shows. Because me and my buddy, who actually grew up in Compton, too—he passed away a few years ago, but his name was Guillermo Anderson. He was talented, too, really talented. And we were the youngest artists in that show, the *Panorama of Black Artists*, in 1972.
- 01-00:31:01
Cooks: Oh, Guillermo was in that, too!
- 01-00:31:03
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 01-00:31:04
Cooks: Oh, I didn't realize that.
- 01-00:31:05
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 01-00:31:05
Cooks: So when—
- 01-00:31:06
Wyatt: We were the youngest in that whole show.
- 01-00:31:10
Cooks: There's a picture that LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art] has on their website of you. I sent it to Amanda, because I said, "Look at how young he is!"
- 01-00:31:17
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 01-00:31:17
Cooks: I mean—
- 01-00:31:19
Wyatt: Yeah, and then I started to get my 'fro and everything. I want that hair now I had. By the time I got in twelfth grade, it was hair, yeah. [indicates size of hair and laughs]
- 01-00:31:29
Cooks: So when you say by the time you got to Fairfax you were in shows, you don't mean the school plays, you mean in the galleries and museums?
- 01-00:31:35
Wyatt: Yeah, actual shows. In fact, one of the shows that I was in—this is quite shortly after I went to Fairfax—there was a show at the—I think I've told Amanda about it, at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. And you know, it was just

a roll call of Black artists: Betye Saar and everybody was in the show. I had a piece in there that day when I was fourteen, a drawing. And there was this guy who was standing there, and he totally had a few drinks and everything, and he was like, "Oh, that's beautiful." And my parents went over to say—you know, of course they were proud. He said, "Isn't this beautiful?" "Yeah, this is my son's work." "Where is he? I want to meet him." "No, he couldn't come. He's too young." Because they were serving alcohol, and it was an adult—

01-00:32:28

Cooks: Wow, a nighttime kind of event.

01-00:32:29

Wyatt: Yeah. Just, "I want to introduce him to a friend of mine." And he introduced my parents to the vice chancellor of UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] at the time, which is C.Z. Wilson. But the guy who was going on and on about the work was Franklin Murphy, you know? [laughs] It's—

01-00:32:47

Cooks: This is incredible!

01-00:32:50

Wyatt: Yeah, it really is. We got in touch with C.Z. Wilson and Dr. Art Smith, which is now—he changed his name to Molefi [Kete] Asante, I believe it is.

01-00:33:01

Cooks: Oh wow.

01-00:33:02

Wyatt: But he was the head of the Afro-American Studies Center [Center for Afro-American Studies] at UCLA at the time. Chicano Studies, Ethnic Studies, everything was there in Campbell Hall. And so they commissioned me and Guillermo to do a mural for the Center, and we did it. It was great for us, because we caught the bus every day from Compton to go paint this mural. It took about a month to do it. But for us, it was: actually being a part of the college environment, it made us want to be a part of that. You know, we would sit there—we took a break to have lunch—"We've got to go to college, man. This is great!"

01-00:33:50

Cooks: So you were about, what, fourteen?

01-00:33:52

Wyatt: Thirteen, fourteen.

01-00:33:54

Cooks: Okay, I have so many questions, Richard. So with the Dorothy Chandler show, do you remember—you were so young—but why did that show happen? Who organized it?

- 01-00:34:08
Wyatt: I think it was organized by—oh man. You know, the Black Arts Council was really active then.
- 01-00:34:19
Cooks: Okay, that started at LACMA.
- 01-00:34:22
Wyatt: Yeah, it started at LACMA. I'm not sure who actually administered it, created that whole exhibition, but all the same artists were a part of it. And all the same people who were part of the Black Arts Council were part of this world, too.
- 01-00:34:44
Cooks: So maybe Cecil Ferguson or Claude Booker?
- 01-00:34:47
Wyatt: Well yeah, Cecil, Claude Booker.
- 01-00:34:47
Cooks: They would have found a space, because it was very unusual. It was hard for Black artists to get shows.
- 01-00:34:57
Wyatt: Yeah. Oh, especially at this—
- 01-00:34:59
Cooks: And unusual for it to be in like a white institution.
- 01-00:35:01
Wyatt: Right. Well, during that whole time—because you mentioned Cecil and Claude—I remember doing shows like at churches, gyms—
- 01-00:35:10
Cooks: Sure.
- 01-00:35:11
Wyatt: —parks, where they just set up easels and everything. But they were good shows and they had good artists in the shows.
- 01-00:35:18
Cooks: Right. So were your parents looking out for opportunities for you? Like they would have found out about the Dorothy Chandler—
- 01-00:35:27
Wyatt: No, because at that time, the work was out there, and we knew enough artists, so they just kind of—I was like the kid in the group, so they would just make room for me at the time! [laughs]

- 01-00:35:39
Cooks: Okay. Let me go back to a couple of things. I wanted to ask about that, and you know, since you mentioned the mural that you did with Guillermo, can we talk about the subject matter of that work?
- 01-00:35:59
Wyatt: Sure, there is—I'm sorry, did you [finish]?
- 01-00:36:02
Cooks: No, I mean, I know what it looks like, and people who are listening and reading can look it up. But I was wondering how you got that commission, if they gave you a suggestion, this is what we're looking for, or how you came up with ideas?
- 01-00:36:19
Wyatt: No, the beauty of that was is that when we received that commission, we were given total freedom. So we did a piece that was based on family, kind of African American lineage, children in the front. I don't know if you're familiar with the piece of anything, but—
- 01-00:36:36
Cooks: Yeah, yeah.
- 01-00:36:40
Wyatt: And you know, and then there's one figure of a male figure—I think he's gray, I'm kind of envisioning it here now—
- 01-00:36:44
Cooks: Has a beard and then he's—
- 01-00:36:46
Wyatt: Yeah, he's kind of like protecting—
- 01-00:36:47
Cooks: And he's under an archway.
- 01-00:36:48
Wyatt: Yeah, exactly. So that's what that was about. It was kind of a generational approach to the African American experience, as well as the legacy issue, as well, too. You know, and the idea of community, and protecting that community, and looking out for the kids and everything.
- 01-00:37:12
Cooks: And so they gave you free rein.
- 01-00:37:13
Wyatt: Right.
- 01-00:37:14
Cooks: And it was going to be part of Afro-American Studies.

- 01-00:37:18
Wyatt: Yeah, the Afro-American Studies Center.
- 01-00:37:21
Cooks: And I was going to ask what you made it on, because it's movable.
- 01-00:37:27
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 01-00:37:27
Cooks: It's not permanently on the wall.
- 01-00:37:29
Wyatt: No, it's not. Which was good that they had the foresight to do that. [laughs] Because it's on plywood or—I forget, I don't even know. They just created this surface for us to paint, and the structure was like wood. I do remember that. And we had to prep it, like we would prep canvas or whatever or wood, to make sure that the paint wouldn't fade. Yeah. So we did all that.
- 01-00:37:55
Cooks: And tell me again, where did you meet Guillermo?
- 01-00:37:57
Wyatt: I met Guillermo at Chouinard Art Institute, which is now CalArts [California Institute of the Arts].
- 01-00:38:05
Cooks: Right.
- 01-00:38:06
Wyatt: But back then, they had like these Saturday classes, and that's when I met him. Because we, as kids, we attended the Saturday class there. It wasn't that long, because I know it was kind of expensive, but I was there for maybe a couple years. And it was like maybe ten sessions per year or something like that, and that's where I met Guillermo, yeah.
- 01-00:38:33
Cooks: Okay. Did he live in Compton, also?
- 01-00:38:36
Wyatt: Yeah, he lived in Compton.
- 01-00:38:36
Cooks: He did, okay.
- 01-00:38:38
Wyatt: Oh yeah.
- 01-00:38:39
Cooks: And at that time, Chouinard was close to where Otis [Art Institute] was.

- 01-00:38:43
Wyatt: Right yeah, you can walk there.
- 01-00:38:43
Cooks: It wasn't that far.
- 01-00:38:44
Wyatt: Yeah, you can walk right there.
- 01-00:38:46
Cooks: It's all right by MacArthur Park. Okay. Well, let's talk about this moment, that early moment where the Saturday classes are happening. Are they the same professors that are teaching there during the week?
- 01-00:39:02
Wyatt: Are you talking about Tutor/Art [Program]?
- 01-00:39:04
Cooks: Well, so there's—
- 01-00:39:05
Wyatt: Or are you talking about Chouinard?
- 01-00:39:07
Cooks: Let's keep talking about Chouinard, and then let's talk about these other places, like Tutor[/Art] at Otis, and then Studio Watts Workshop.
- 01-00:39:17
Wyatt: Okay. Well, Chouinard was, like I said, it was a Saturday class, and it was for kids. The teacher that I had, her name was Alice Beamish, and she was a really, really good teacher, you know, and just a fantastic person, as well, too. But she would show us different techniques and expose us to different shows. She took us to exhibitions and everything.
- 01-00:39:40
Cooks: Wow.
- 01-00:39:41
Wyatt: It was really cool. The sixties was a different time period, man, and you know, it was like great. And that's where I met Watson Cross, who was a teacher there, a legendary teacher there. I mean, they just had so many teachers there, and they would allow us to go into different classes and draw, except for the nudes and all that stuff. But I actually started drawing and painting nudes when I was twelve years old at the Studio Watts Workshop.
- 01-00:40:13
Cooks: Okay. Can you tell us a bit about Studio Watts Workshop?
- 01-00:40:16
Wyatt: Studio Watts Workshop was run by [James] "Jim" Woods, the late Jim Woods, and the director at the time was Melvin Longmire. And Barbara

Ekholm was part of it, as well, too. It's all in the book that I was on the cover of, the *UCLA Alumni Magazine* [from summer 1968], about the same time.

01-00:40:41

Cooks: Oh okay, yes, yes.

01-00:40:42

Wyatt: There's a story that goes along with that, as well, too, and I have to see if I can find that for you guys, dig that up, and I'll give you a copy of it. But they had different painting going on, and then they had life drawing. But it was basically artists from the community, and there was a lot of talent in that [community], oh man! I mean, I could see it at a young age, the people that would visit and work in that studio. The talent was just over the top. And not only that, but you had the Watts Towers Art Center, as well, too, but you also had Watts Writers Workshop, which Wanda Coleman came out of, you know? I knew her really well, because her brother was a teacher of mine, George Evans, who's—

01-00:41:36

Cooks: Oh, that's right, and they're siblings. Isn't that wild?

01-00:41:38

Wyatt: Yeah, that's amazing. Yeah. So there was so much talent there.

01-00:41:43

Cooks: So Studio Watts was in Watts.

01-00:41:46

Wyatt: Was in Watts.

01-00:41:47

Cooks: But then you'd run across town for real to get to Chouinard and Otis.

01-00:41:53

Wyatt: Right.

01-00:41:54

Cooks: So you're taking classes in different parts of Los Angeles.

01-00:41:57

Wyatt: Yeah, but the Chouinard happened before I started going to Studio Watts. I was like around nine years old, nine or ten years old when I was going to Chouinard, yeah.

01-00:42:07

Cooks: Okay. Did you find that there was a sense of community between Studio Watts and Watts Towers, or between—or was it competitive between Chouinard and Otis, or—

01-00:42:20

Wyatt:

No. Well, it was a healthy competitive, and especially when I got to Tutor/Art. But when you talk about Studio Watts Workshop, Watts Towers, and all these other places, Watts Writers Workshop. It was just one [creative community], everybody knew everybody. And to this day I know people there, because it was just this one creative community, you know? Energy, you know, and everybody knew it. Visual artists knew the play writers and writers. There was a lot of really creative energy there during that whole period, you know, and then it kind of lapsed. But once John Outterbridge got back to the Towers, then it started again, because I started working down there, as well, too, and so that energy started to happen again.

01-00:43:16

Cooks:

Okay. So I want to ask: it might not be a big deal, but I know to some of the later teachers, the fact that you were drawing nudes when you were a kid, did you realize that was a big deal, or it was supposed to be a big deal?

01-00:43:29

Wyatt:

Well yeah! [laughs] I'm like twelve and thirteen, and everything's starting to kick in then, you know? So it was, but once you got into it, you weren't—

01-00:43:41

Cooks:

Right.

01-00:43:42

Wyatt:

But there were some beautiful models there, too, you know? But most of them really weren't. And there were certain models like Lala and Soso, who were just really great to draw and paint, and everybody knew them, you know?

01-00:43:57

Cooks:

Wait, those are their names?

01-00:43:59

Wyatt:

Oh yeah. Lala—

01-00:43:59

Cooks:

Lala and Soso?

01-00:44:01

Wyatt:

Soso, yeah. Yeah. And there was another model, Brenda. There were a lot of models that we knew, I knew from Watts. And even when I got to Tutor/Art, because all the same—the ones that were really popular and were really good models, the teachers—like Charlie, Charles White would use them, and they would model in our class at Tutor/Art. And once again, it was like this one collective effort, you know?

01-00:44:29

Cooks:

Were they all women, or were they men and women?

01-00:44:32

Wyatt:

Oh, they were men and women.

- 01-00:44:33
Cooks: And were they different races?
- 01-00:44:36
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 01-00:44:37
Cooks: Wow.
- 01-00:44:38
Wyatt: Yeah, you had Black, Asian—
- 01-00:44:43
Cooks: That's so interesting.
- 01-00:44:43
Wyatt: Yeah, it was the sixties.
- 01-00:44:49
Cooks: And you were the youngest one in the class, I imagine?
- 01-00:44:52
Wyatt: Yeah, at that time, in the Tutor/Art Program, I was the youngest one. This is at Otis now, yeah.
- 01-00:44:58
Cooks: Okay. Did you ever feel intimidated being in these classes with people who were older than you?
- 01-00:45:04
Wyatt: Well yeah, at first, because I was young, you know? But by and large, most of the artists during that period were really good artists, the older ones, and I kind of looked up to them. You had artists like James Borders and Dave Monkawa. Oh man, what was his name—
- 01-00:45:31
Cooks: I'm not familiar with these names.
- 01-00:45:33
Wyatt: Oh no no, you wouldn't be, but they were really talented people.
- 01-00:45:40
Cooks: And they were older than you?
- 01-00:45:41
Wyatt: Yeah, Mark Mendez. I mean, there were plenty of people that were really, really talented that had never really pursued art as a career or a practice, you know, but the talent was just off the charts. At that young age it was intimidating, until I start developing personally, too, as an artist, and getting older. I think it was like, I'm one of the crowd, you know? [laughs]

- 01-00:46:11
Cooks: And then people just expected to see you.
- 01-00:46:12
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah.
- 01-00:46:16
Cooks: Yeah. I wanted to talk just a bit about media. Did you have a preferred media, or did you take to one thing immediately?
- 01-00:46:23
Wyatt: Yeah, drawing. I was really into Conté crayon, and Charles White was a master of that, so he showed me a lot of different techniques, and that was really cool. It was pretty much drawing. I didn't really start painting until later on in, I would say, my latter years in high school, and especially in college. That's when I really started painting, was in college, yeah.
- 01-00:46:54
Cooks: So in terms of chronology, Richard, I just want to make sure I got this right. So you started off, when you were about nine years old at Chouinard.
- 01-00:47:02
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 01-00:47:03
Cooks: It's hard for me not to laugh when I say this! [laughs]
- 01-00:47:05
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 01-00:47:06
Cooks: Nine years old at Chouinard. Okay. And then after that, do you go to the Tutor/Art Program?
- 01-00:47:14
Wyatt: [Yeah, but I went to the Studio Watts Workshop before I went to the Tutor/Art Program.]
- 01-00:47:16
Cooks: Okay, I don't think we talked quite about that. Because there's a story of your mom—
- 01-00:47:23
Wyatt: Yeah, exactly, and that's true.
- 01-00:47:24
Cooks: Would you tell us that story?
- 01-00:47:25
Wyatt: My mom always said, "I want you to meet Charles White." And her doctor at the time—I think his name was Dr. [William A.] Beck, [Sr.]—knew Charles White, Charles White was one of his patients. So he says, "Yeah, he needs to

really meet Charles White." And I think he passed away before he could introduce him. But my mom said, "I want you to meet him." So she actually called Otis and said, "I want to speak with Charles, and I want my son to meet him, because he really likes the work," and so on and so on. "I want him to meet him and see his work." "Oh, just tell him to come on down. We've got a program here." [Charlie asked, "How old is he?" My mom said, "He's about twelve." Charles's reply was, "Just tell him to come on down."] So we came down, and I remember we were outside of the classroom, because they had nude models in there. He looked at the work, and he says, "Wait a minute. I want to get somebody else." So he went in and got Bill Pajaud to come out and look at it, and then they said, "Well, he's in." He says, "Well first of all," he said, "you don't mind if he draws or paints nudes or anything like that?" [She] says, "Oh no." Because I was already drawing nudes at Studio Watts Workshop, you know? [laughs]

01-00:48:38

Cooks: They were like, "He already did that."

01-00:48:39

Wyatt: Yeah. So it's no problem. They said, "Well, he's in," and that's how it all started.

01-00:48:46

Cooks: Wow.

01-00:48:47

Wyatt: Yeah, and then I got my buddy Guillermo in the class, too. So that's how it started. I was like just this kid. And it was a great program. So like I say, we had Charles White next door. John Riddle was one of the teachers. [Cooks laughs] George Evans taught the class, and he just got out of Chouinard. You know, he graduated, and he was one of the teachers. And he was like a real good friend. My big brother I call him, George.

01-00:49:19

Cooks: Bill Pajaud was there.

01-00:49:19

Wyatt: Bill Pajaud. He was actually one of the like co-founders of that whole program, as well, too. Golden State [Mutual Life Insurance Company].

01-00:49:29

Cooks: That's right.

01-00:49:31

Wyatt: You know, they really supported that whole program a lot. Archie Boston, who was one of the first Black advertising firms. Yeah—

01-00:49:42

Cooks: So there was some corporate money that was helping to support the Saturday—

01-00:49:47

Wyatt:

Exactly, yeah, because the guy, Bill Tara, who ran it, who actually started it, he was a corporate art director. There's a story that goes—George tells it really good in his interview with Eric [Hanks on *Eric's Perspective*]—but he says that how he got the contract with Ford is that he went in—it's Ford or Chevrolet or whatever—but he went in and he had a cigar, and put his cigar on the table and says, "I'm going to show you guys how to make this really work." George tells it. Go look at the George Evans thing where he tells that story really well. But anyway, he was the one that started, and he started it because he knew that there were a lack of women, people of color, in advertising during that whole period of time. We're talking about the sixties. So he created this vehicle, which was Tutor/Art, in order to really encourage and foster kids that were really, really serious about art. They went to high schools all over the city, they went to underserved areas, they went to Torrance, they went to Simi Valley. But one of the things that was really important to Bill was that, "I don't necessarily want the students from the art classes. I want the students that doodle," that's the kind of people that they wanted. And it worked out really, really well. And so that's how he started the program. This was started like back in, wow, I want to say '66, '67, around there. Yeah, I got there around '69 or so.

01-00:51:33

Cooks:

Okay. So Bill was an art director.

01-00:51:35

Wyatt:

Right.

01-00:51:35

Cooks:

For a corporation.

01-00:51:36

Wyatt:

Bill Tara.

01-00:51:38

Cooks:

Was he an artist? Did he take art classes himself at some earlier time?

01-00:51:43

Wyatt:

You know, I know that he was really well known, in terms of art directing and *CA* magazine, and he was there. [laughs] He was a signature person in that whole world of advertising, *Communication Arts* magazine. He was an icon, and so he could get the best teachers and instructors, because he knew everybody, you know? [laughs]

01-00:52:16

Cooks:

Right, and then with other organizations, he was able to get some support. Because I suppose it was a Saturday program?

01-00:52:23

Wyatt:

Right, it was a Saturday program.

- 01-00:52:24
Cooks: Somebody has to pay for the materials or maybe rent the space? I don't know.
- 01-00:52:32
Wyatt: No, no. It was part of the whole thing—and I think Charlie had a lot to do with that—was they made a room available for us there, which is really great. And so the supplies and everything, I know that Golden State contributed a lot, and Bill also got funding from corporate sources, too.
- 01-00:52:49
Cooks: That's incredible.
- 01-00:52:51
Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So that was really, it was a—
- 01-00:52:53
Cooks: It's interesting that he wanted the kids that doodle, you know?
- 01-00:52:58
Wyatt: Yeah!
- 01-00:52:59
Cooks: Instead of we want your best artists, but trying to maybe—
- 01-00:53:03
Wyatt: I mean, he didn't overlook that, but he was really interested in the kids that did doodle a lot and that were kind of compulsive in it. [laughs] Yeah.
- 01-00:53:16
Cooks: Wow, that's a great story. I don't know how much that's really well known.
- 01-00:53:21
Wyatt: Yeah. And we had access once [the schools closed], because at Tutor/Art Program at Otis, every once in a while, it would shut down for two or three weeks, the whole facility. We still had access to Chouinard up the street, to Art Center [College of Design], which was still on Third St. Yeah.
- 01-00:53:46
Cooks: Okay. And not [yet] in Pasadena.
- 01-00:53:48
Wyatt: Yeah. So we'd just walk into classes. Everybody knew who we were, and they see these kids walking in with 'fros and long hair, and girls in bell bottoms, you know? And so we'd walk in there and just start drawing, and people were blown away, man! They couldn't—[laughs]
- 01-00:54:06
Cooks: Wow!
- 01-00:54:06
Wyatt: Yeah, and we'd sit on the floor. We'd sit on the floor, big piece of paper, and draw, and different angles, you know?

01-00:54:16

Cooks: In that program, did you have art crits, or did everyone just draw and really [do] what they wanted?

01-00:54:24

Wyatt: Oh no, they did. One of the requirements was that we kept and maintained a sketchbook every week. The sketchbook would keep you in that class, because it's the work that you do outside on your own, which it was a way of kind of like gauging your development, too. They didn't want anybody in there wasting time, they wanted students that were serious. So we'd do that. And it was fun, because when we'd get there in the morning, we'd spend like about an hour just looking at everybody's sketchbooks, people passing them around, looking at them, you know? No, they wouldn't do really heavy critiques or anything, but they would just basically tell you—for instance, if you were in the graphic arts class in the morning, they would look at that work and they would look at your sketchbook, and everybody would put their work up, and they'd say, "Well, maybe you can do this." Because visually on a page, the lettering might be too small or whatever. They'd do stuff like that, yeah. And it was really, really helpful. And Charlie was really [honest]. He would tell you, too, he'd tell you in a minute, man, like, "No, this is not working," you know? Yeah. [laughs]

01-00:55:42

Cooks: And you want to make them proud.

01-00:55:44

Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah.

01-00:55:45

Cooks: I mean, this is your idol.

01-00:55:47

Wyatt: Oh yeah. And he was just so down to earth. I don't know, did you ever have a chance to meet him or anything?

01-00:55:54

Cooks: No.

01-00:55:56

Wyatt: He was just so down to earth. All the students like really just loved him. Yeah, because he was so humble, and his work was just incredible! [laughs]

01-00:56:07

Cooks: Just incredible.

01-00:56:09

Wyatt: Yeah, his legacy, you know?

01-00:56:11

Cooks: Wow.

- 01-00:56:11
Wyatt: But anyway, we had access to all these different schools. In fact, I remember one time when we went to Chouinard, and back then performance art was called happenings, [laughs] you know, in the sixties. So they had this big happening going on in this room, and you have all psychedelic lights, and you had the models dancing nude. And me and my buddy, we actually physically painted the model, you know? We were—
- 01-00:56:34
Cooks: You did?
- 01-00:56:34
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah! They'd let you paint, you know? [laughs] Well you know, it's around fourteen. It was no problem, you know? [Cooks laughs] And so the dean came into the class and says, "What are these kids doing in here?" This is the sixties, the student body was running those guys crazy anyway, and it was like a whole new generation. But then one of the teachers says, "Well, look at their work." And so they stepped back and looked at the work, and said, "Oh, I guess they can stay." [laughs]
- 01-00:57:10
Cooks: Wow.
- 01-00:57:11
Wyatt: But it was pretty wild, yeah.
- 01-00:57:15
Cooks: That sounds wild.
- 01-00:57:18
Wyatt: Yeah! [laughs]
- 01-00:57:17
Cooks: Wild!
- 01-00:57:19
Wyatt: Yeah, it really was.
- 01-00:57:21
Cooks: Wow.
- 01-00:57:22
Wyatt: It was the sixties.
- 01-00:57:24
Cooks: Yeah. So you were all over the city. So when you were part of the Tutor/Art Program, were you also at Studio Watts? Is that at the same time?
- 01-00:57:34
Wyatt: No, you know, I quit going to Studio Watts, and I started going to [the Tutor/Art Program at] Otis full time. The Communicative Arts Academy in

Compton that they had, that John Outterbridge and Noah Purifoy and Justin Powell put together, that was in Compton. And I did an interview with a young lady from the *New York Times*, [Melissa Smith, "In Compton, a School That Paved the Way for Generations of Black Artists"] about that whole time period. I just went there a couple times. I just remember kind of like what it looked like, but all my attention and energy was focused on Tutor/Art after that. This is like around '69.

01-00:58:13

Cooks: Okay, okay.

01-00:58:15

Wyatt: So yeah, Tutor/Art was it, and I stayed there until I graduated from high school.

01-00:58:24

Tewes: So about thirteen on?

01-00:58:25

Wyatt: Yes, from '69—yeah, '69, yeah.

01-00:58:28

Cooks: Oh my gosh, okay. So every answer gives me more questions! I have more—

01-00:58:38

Wyatt: Yeah, if you're saying so.

01-00:58:39

Cooks: Because I'm trying to imagine what it was like. Can you tell us some of the other students? Guillermo was in classes with you at Otis.

01-00:58:51

Wyatt: Yeah.

01-00:58:52

Cooks: And Chouinard. Kerry James Marshall?

01-00:58:56

Wyatt: Kerry James Marshall was in the Tutor/Art Program. And I remember the first day he came there, too, to show his work to Charlie. I remember that first day. And Kerry was always really—we were all social. We hung out and we were wild, crazy, and did crazy stuff. Like sometimes we went to Chouinard, and we'd throw clay off the roof. I mean, we just—[makes throwing motions]

01-00:59:19

Cooks: Really?

01-00:59:18

Wyatt: —crazy stuff. But Kerry wasn't. He had an incredible sense of focus then. He was different from us, you know? Everybody was talented, but Kerry, his whole focus during—I just remember him being really, really kind of very

serious at an early age, in terms of his work. And you can see why now. Yeah. But yeah, I remember him. He was there. Mark Greenfield was there. Stuart and Glen Iwasaki, who are both doing really well. In fact Stuart, his brother was responsible for Canadian hockey uniforms for the—he designed them and everything. [And we also had students working for big-name animation studios. Students like Bill Davis, Brenda Banks, and Arthur Cox.]

01-01:00:08

Cooks: Wow.

01-01:00:08

Wyatt: So they've done some incredible stuff. And there was Leo Limón. Kathy Walter, who was from—I forget where she was from. But Kay Lew. Yeah, and it was real diverse, too; women, it was very diverse. To this day we're all friends, except the ones who aren't here.

01-01:00:44

Cooks: Yeah. So I wonder if: at that age, did you feel that you were at a disadvantage as a Black artist, a Black person? Or were you thinking, all the great people are Black? [laughs]

01-01:00:59

Wyatt: Yeah. Well, I knew that, at an early age, that the surrounding group of people—like so you've got: it was David Hammons, Betye [Saar], Noah Purifoy, Outterbridge, you know, Dr. Samella Lewis. In fact, Dr. Samella Lewis was the first person to include me in a book at that age, and it was called the—

01-01:01:16

Cooks: Black Artists on Art?

01-01:01:23

Wyatt: *On Art*, yeah, *Black Artists on Art*, and I think it was volume one. I know that my folks, they got a copy, and it's around here someplace. But yeah, she was an incredible force, you know?

01-01:01:34

Cooks: Did she—

01-01:01:34

Wyatt: Doesn't nearly get the credit that she should have gotten when she was alive.

01-01:01:37

Cooks: Right. Did you form a kind of mentorship with her? I mean, yeah, she's an artist, but also a scholar.

01-01:01:46

Wyatt: Yeah, well yeah!

01-01:01:47

Cooks: Institution-builder, right?

- 01-01:01:49
Wyatt: Yeah, just incredible. And some of the first shows that I had was at her gallery when it was on Pico [Blvd.], before it became the Tanner Gallery. I think it was just the African American Gallery [Museum of African American Art], but later it became the Tanner Gallery.
- 01-01:02:05
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-01:02:05
Wyatt: But and it was right on Pico.
- 01-01:02:09
Cooks: Near Cochran [Ave.] maybe? Or—
- 01-01:02:09
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 01-01:02:10
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-01:02:10
Wyatt: This is like back in sixties, seventies or so. And some of the first shows I had was with her space, gallery space. And she was like really, really supportive.
- 01-01:02:21
Cooks: And you were—is this right—you were still a teenager then?
- 01-01:02:24
Wyatt: Yeah, still a teenager.
- 01-01:02:26
Cooks: But you were aware that this is a big deal, at that time?
- 01-01:02:30
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah. No, I knew it was, because I had so many people tell me. You've got adult artists saying, "Man, this is like—" and I appreciated it, too. I mean, I didn't take it for granted. I just really worked at it, because I always had a sense of: if I was blessed enough to do the things that I could do, then I was accountable for that. You know, in a way, I had to really work as hard as I can to improve and to develop my craft and my practice.
- 01-01:03:11
Cooks: Right, because you—
- 01-01:03:11
Wyatt: I mean, I didn't take it for granted, and I really appreciated it. And to this day, I still do.
- 01-01:03:16
Cooks: Because you came out strong, you know? And then where do you go from there? You have to keep developing.

01-01:03:22

Wyatt:

Yeah. But see, that's all part of the whole thing with once you get that at an early age, it's easier later on, because you realize that you take chances. Sometimes you hit it and sometimes you don't, but you still always want to do your best work no matter what.

01-01:03:41

Cooks:

Did you ever struggle with the pressure to create your own style? You know, you'd already met your idol as a child, [Charles White], who is still, it sounds like, one of your idols.

01-01:03:53

Wyatt:

Oh yeah, he is to this day. [Cooks laughs] Kerry James Marshall, David Hammons, you know, all the same. [Ulysses Jenkins, Eloy Torrez], Kent Twitchell, Judithe Hernández, everybody. And he didn't try to have you draw or paint like him. He was interested in you developing your own voice.

01-01:04:19

Cooks:

So how did that happen for you? Did you feel like you had to develop your own style and it was a pressure? Or did you just *have* one?

01-01:04:27

Wyatt:

No. And actually, when I was teaching at [University of California], Irvine—and I also taught at Otis for a minute, too, in their Communication and Design Department. I always approached it: I had an assignment for the students, that had like a Rembrandt or just any mainstream artist, and have them do an image—all the same size—but to copy that image exactly. And then the next week, they'd put them all up on the wall, and they were all different. None of them looked like the original. And the whole purpose of that is that no matter how much you try to copy, it's not going to happen. You, as the artist and as a person, is always going to come through. So I wasn't really worried about style and developing that, because often, style can get in the way of your development, because then it becomes too formulaic sometimes, you know? And to me, the best work, and the artists that I really like, are the artists that, even though there was something in the work that you notice and you know, this is Charles White, this is Timothy Washington or whatever, but there's still something in there that continues to explore and grow. And you know it's the same person. It's like David. He's one of my favorite artists, David Hammons, yeah.

01-01:05:55

Cooks:

And every show is different.

01-01:05:57

Wyatt:

Yeah.

01-01:05:57

Cooks:

And you don't recognize them sometimes.

- 01-01:06:01
Wyatt: Right.
- 01-01:06:01
Cooks: It's like, who's painting on the fur coats?
- 01-01:06:02
Wyatt: Yeah, right, right!
- 01-01:06:02
Cooks: It's like, oh, David. Okay.
- 01-01:06:06
Wyatt: Oh yeah. David doesn't talk a lot. He doesn't go into this whole academic kind of [explanation]. He just does the work, and he's brilliant, man! He's like totally brilliant, you know?
- 01-01:06:18
Cooks: Yeah.
- 01-01:06:19
Wyatt: Who else is really good, a young artist who I really like a lot, is Lauren Halsey.
- 01-01:06:25
Cooks: Oh really!
- 01-01:06:27
Wyatt: Yeah. I like her work. My mom, actually, she worked at a school part-time later on like in the eighties, it was a Montessori school over in Westchester, [California]. And Lauren's grandmother and my mother were best friends. And Lauren actually went to that school. I ran into her, it was at—I forget where it was—"So are you related to Mrs. Wyatt?" And I said, "Yeah, it's my mom." She said, "Oh, tell her I love her."
- 01-01:06:53
Cooks: Wow. It's such a small world!
- 01-01:06:57
Wyatt: Yeah. But Lauren's work that I like, it has nothing to do with what I do. It's just you can just tell. It comes off authentic and it just comes off really—yeah.
- 01-01:07:11
Cooks: So I wanted to also just, for the record—and you talked about some of these people already—but some of the people who were your mentors when you were a teenager. So Charles White we've talked about; Bill Pajaud we've talked about.
- 01-01:07:30
Wyatt: Bill Pajaud.

01-01:07:32

Cooks: When did you meet Noah Purifoy?

01-01:07:34

Wyatt: Noah Purifoy, I met him—this is like well back in—I think I was maybe eleven. It was a little bit before the Chalk-In or during that whole time period, which is 1968. I really didn't know him that well. I just knew his work, and I knew seeing him around he was—he would speak, and he was just another one of these giants around at that time, that you knew the work was good, just couldn't articulate it, but you knew the work was good. So he was just one of the folks that you would see around here all the time and at shows. And yeah, it was an incredible period of time.

01-01:08:20

Cooks: So did you ever take a class with him and Judson [Powell]? Or he was just part of your peer group?

01-01:08:25

Wyatt: No, no. See, they were a different generation from me.

01-01:08:31

Cooks: Yes.

01-01:08:31

Wyatt: Much different. And I just knew that these guys were special, but I never looked closely at their [work]. I guess except with John Outterbridge or John Riddle, who was actually one of my teachers at Tutor/Art, and he was really just an inspirational teacher and incredible, yeah. Same thing for like John Scott, you know, enormous! Just incredible. That's a whole 'nother story, when I went to New Orleans.

01-01:09:01

Cooks: We're going to get to that.

01-01:09:02

Wyatt: It would probably take up the interview. [laughs]

01-01:09:03

Cooks: We're going to get to that. Yeah, we want to hear that one. So I wanted to back up a bit, just in terms of context, what was going on historically. We were wondering: how did you become aware of the civil rights movement, or how did that show up and become part of your consciousness?

01-01:09:25

Wyatt: Well, at an early age, especially during that whole period of time, you couldn't help but—you know, I mean, it's like the sixties. You're getting the news every day: what was going on in the South. In fact, when we traveled back there, I still remember the signs: "colored" and all that stuff like that.

01-01:09:48

Cooks: Really?

- 01-01:09:48
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 01-01:09:48
Cooks: When you went back—
- 01-01:09:49
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 01-01:09:50
Cooks: —to Tennessee?
- 01-01:09:50
Wyatt: To Memphis, yeah, oh yeah. But you've got to realize that the way it was then, in terms of awareness, it's like it is now. Where things that are going on now, that people are going to look back generations from now and think, this is crazy. They allowed that to happen? And so it was just part of what was going on in that period of time. And one of the things John Riddle taught me I remember to this day, he said, "You can get mad and throw a brick, or you can put that same energy into creating some artwork." He was right, you know? So I mean, it helped define my work, because a lot of my work at that age, early age, like thirteen, fourteen, it was pretty political.
- 01-01:10:46
Cooks: So it was part of the inspiration for you. Because I think about what you've been talking about, in terms of training and working with live models. What kind of subject matter did *you* choose? What did you think you wanted to really express in your own art?
- 01-01:11:05
Wyatt: Well, during that whole period of time, between '68 and, I would say, '72, '73, the kind of work that I was doing was kind of like it was social justice oriented. I mean, I had one piece that I did when I was fourteen, a big charcoal drawing. It was at that show at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.
- 01-01:11:27
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-01:11:28
Wyatt: It was called *Guilty or Not?* Question mark. And it was—
- 01-01:11:33
Cooks: Really?
- 01-01:11:33
Wyatt: Yeah, it was a guy who was being lynched, you know? It really, it moved, yeah, everybody. [laughs]
- 01-01:11:41
Cooks: Oh my goodness! That was one of my questions: what was the artwork? That was it?

- 01-01:11:46
Wyatt: Yeah, that was it.
- 01-01:11:48
Cooks: That's the one that the chancellor and vice chancellor at UCLA saw?
- 01-01:11:52
Wyatt: Correct, right, yeah.
- 01-01:11:53
Cooks: How did you come up with that composition?
- 01-01:11:58
Wyatt: Well you know, I mean, like I said, it was like kind of what was going on TV. You've got to realize that I was probably like TV generation, too, you know? I mean, it was basically three channels and a few independents. I remember when TV went off. [laughs] It just went off.
- 01-01:12:20
Cooks: Time to go to bed.
- 01-01:12:22
Wyatt: Yeah, it was like, you know, [sings the beginning melody of the national anthem], the flag waving, and it just went off. And at that age, I was really aware of a lot of stuff. I remember my dad took me to see—this is like back in '68, '69—Eldridge Cleaver was giving a speech in the sixties, and I remember we went down to hear him speak. So my dad was really aware of all that stuff. They wore dashikis back then, you know? And there was a special store they used to go to called Harambee, and it was on Washington [Blvd.], and that was the place to go to get your dashikis and headwear and all that stuff like that.
- 01-01:13:12
Cooks: Oh!
- 01-01:13:13
Wyatt: Yeah, they were into that. They were really very Black-conscious during that whole period of time.
- 01-01:13:20
Cooks: Okay, wow. So I mean, that's fantastic. So you have it in the house, your parents want you to be aware of it. But this is really hardcore work, [laughs] the subject matter of lynching. And showing that at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion?
- 01-01:13:39
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah.
- 01-01:13:40
Cooks: I mean, that could be controversial *now*.

- 01-01:13:41
Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. [laughs]
- 01-01:13:43
Cooks: That's incredible. Okay. Well now, were you too young—I mean, I know how old you were—but for *66 Signs of Neon*, did that show—?
- 01-01:13:56
Wyatt: Yeah, that was before my time.
- 01-01:13:58
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-01:13:59
Wyatt: It was really before my time.
- 01-01:14:00
Cooks: You start so—
- 01-01:14:00
Wyatt: That was Noah Purifoy.
- 01-01:14:01
Cooks: Yes, you start so early, that I know. You're young. I'm not sure how tuned in you were, exposed to things.
- 01-01:14:10
Wyatt: No, I really wasn't at all. I didn't really get that tuned in to art or the art world until after the Chalk-In, when I was twelve, and then that's when everything really just kicked in.
- 01-01:14:20
Cooks: Let's talk about that. So you're twelve years old, and this was the first Watts Chalk-In.
- 01-01:14:27
Wyatt: Right.
- 01-01:14:28
Cooks: And this went on for a number of years.
- 01-01:14:30
Wyatt: Yeah. And in fact, I won in '68, and then a couple of years later I won again in junior high school. [laughs] But what happened is my dad, he saw the advertisement for it. It was this big chalk-in that invited people from all over LA to be a part of, and so people came from all parts of the city to be a part of it. And it was actually drawn on the street. They blocked off the street, and you used chalk. And so I did this drawing of Dr. [Martin Luther] King, and you know, I just started drawing and I had my little pillow [to sit on] there and smoothed it out and everything. Just drawing. And part of the thing was is that people voted, the spectators actually voted for what they liked. And so I

finished it all, and then I noticed a lot of people coming around and everything. And I won the children's category, and also won the best of the show. I remember Tom Bradley was a councilman then, and he presented me with the award, and he said, "Oh, by the way, young man, what school do you want to go to?" And I said, "UCLA." At that age, you know, basically it was because I liked their football and basketball.

01-01:15:44

Cooks: Yeah. [laughs]

01-01:15:45

Wyatt: You know! It wasn't anything else. [laughs]

01-01:15:50

Cooks: But then two years later, doing a mural there.

01-01:15:52

Wyatt: Yeah.

01-01:15:52

Cooks: And then you do go to UCLA.

01-01:15:54

Wyatt: Yeah. And it's amazing.

01-01:15:57

Cooks: Okay.

01-01:15:57

Wyatt: And he was excited about it, Bradley was excited about it, because that was his alma mater, you know, which he said. And it seemed like—

01-01:16:03

Cooks: Okay, wow. I'm sure he remembered you, first of all.

01-01:16:08

Wyatt: Oh, Tom Bradley had an incredible memory. If he could meet you once, you could meet him, "Oh hi, man, how are you doing?" "Hi, Bridget."

01-01:16:16

Cooks: Wow.

01-01:16:17

Wyatt: Ten years later, he'd remember your name. He had a photographic memory, yeah. Because [years later, after the Chalk-In, I found out] he knew my uncle, who was on the police department. Tom Bradley, he was on the police department at that [time], he had trained my uncle. And so it was just like way, way back. And so he'd always [said], "How's your father and mother?" He knew it was me.

01-01:16:43

Cooks: Incredible.

01-01:16:45

Wyatt: Yeah.

01-01:16:46

Cooks: So I wanted to also ask: I have noted that—was Varnette Honeywood, was she part of the younger generation?

01-01:16:53

Wyatt: Oh yeah. In fact, Varnette Honeywood, I think she was in the Chalk-In, too. I believe so, because I remember us doing once we had won—and I think she won a category, too—they invited us to this local TV show where they showed movies. It was called *Man on the Street*. And so we did these kind of like reenactments of the pieces that we did for the Chalk-In on this plywood. And you know, they would show the movie, and every once in a while they'd come back during a commercial break to talk to us. So that was pretty exciting. [My drawing was purchased by the actor Robert Wagner.] I remember Varnette being a part of that, yeah.

01-01:17:34

Cooks: Wow!

01-01:17:36

Wyatt: Yeah. Oh, Varnette. I miss Varnette. She was real good people. And she could cook, too! [laughs]

01-01:17:46

Cooks: Oh really? I didn't know that.

01-01:17:47

Wyatt: Oh man, oh man! Whoo!

01-01:17:52

Cooks: I wanted to talk a little bit about what else you were doing outside of the art world. At the beginning, we talked a little bit about your exposure to music, and your parents both being musical and having a piano in the house. But you also met Freddie Perren around this time.

01-01:18:11

Wyatt: Correct.

01-01:18:11

Cooks: And I want to make sure he's part of your story, too.

01-01:18:15

Wyatt: Oh yeah. Well, I met Freddie Perren and his wife, Christine [Yarian Perren], you know, and who's also a songwriter.

01-01:18:22

Cooks: Yes.

01-01:18:22

Wyatt:

During the Motown period, I met them just through our church. My parents knew them, invited them over. We had an organ at the time, too, as well as a piano. So, "Yeah, he's a good artist, but he's also [interested in] music." And so I started playing a song he enjoyed, and he says, "You know, you ought to write. You're really good." And I hadn't thought about that, about writing. I had groups in high school, you know, you get together with [your friends and play music]. And so what happened was is that I started writing songs, and I could always just, like I say, hear the music: what the bass would do and all that stuff.

01-01:19:07

Cooks:

And how old are you around this time?

01-01:19:10

Wyatt:

I was around I'd say about eighteen or so.

01-01:19:15

Cooks:

Okay.

01-01:19:15

Wyatt:

Yeah, eighteen years old. Because the very first song that I recorded was for The Miracles. This is right after Smokey [Robinson] left, and it was called "Keep on Keepin' On (Doin' What You Do)." And Billy Griffin was the lead singer at that time. Because there's nothing like when you hear your song on the radio the very first time.

01-01:19:36

Cooks:

I can't imagine.

01-01:19:37

Wyatt:

That is incredible!

01-01:19:40

Cooks:

You wrote a song, and then you would share it with Freddie, or he would be a part of you developing it?

01-01:19:46

Wyatt:

Yeah, I would share it with [him]. And then of course, once you write it, then of course they'd bring in all the top musicians. In fact, the very first song I did, because I played on that song, too, and I'm looking at this bass player, and he's like playing with one finger, just incredible riffs, and it was James Jamerson, who was like the signature Motown bass sound. All that stuff is James Jamerson. Just incredible, when you hear his bass. And all one finger. Do you know how hard that is? I mean, most people are like two or whatever it is. Just one finger.

01-01:20:25

Cooks:

That's all he needed.

- 01-01:20:26
Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Incredible.
- 01-01:20:29
Cooks: Now, wait a second now. Other people are home doing their songwriting, but how did you get this entrée into this world where you have these great musicians—
- 01-01:20:44
Wyatt: Well, because, like I say, I knew Freddie Perren. And it didn't happen right away. You know, I developed my songwriting talent. And so I got it to a point where he said, "Well, this is good." And that very first song, he said, "Yeah, this is good. I'll use this for The Miracles." And he's the producer and arranger, so he gets all the musicians and he books them all, that's what a producer does. They get the musicians and arrangers and all, and make a record.
- 01-01:21:11
Cooks: So he was already a professional already by then. Okay.
- 01-01:21:13
Wyatt: Oh yeah, oh yeah. All the early Jackson 5 stuff, that was Freddie. You know, "I Want You Back," "ABC."
- 01-01:21:20
Cooks: Come on!
- 01-01:21:22
Wyatt: ["The Love You Save"] You remember that song, [sings] "It's So Hard to Say Goodbye to Yesterday."
- 01-01:21:27
Cooks: Yes!
- 01-01:21:27
Wyatt: Well, that—
- 01-01:21:29
Cooks: That he wrote?
- 01-01:21:29
Wyatt: "Give Love on Christmas Day," [with his wife, Christine].
- 01-01:21:30
Cooks: Oh my God. Gloria Gaynor, then she did "I Will Survive," which is a little later.
- 01-01:21:37
Wyatt: Yeah, Dino Fekaris and he also wrote "Reunited," Peaches & Herb. Yeah.
- 01-01:21:43
Cooks: Oh, please!

- 01-01:21:43
Wyatt: Yeah. Like I always say, "He's got more hits than Albers got grits, man."
[laughs]
- 01-01:21:50
Cooks: Oh my goodness!
- 01-01:21:52
Wyatt: And again, you know, he's like one of the nicest people. He passed away a few years ago, but one of the nicest people you can—just a great sense of humor. Yeah.
- 01-01:22:02
Cooks: Now, what church is this?
- 01-01:22:04
Wyatt: This is Lincoln Memorial Congregational Church, and the minister was Reverend [Lloyd] Galloway. And I was like born, pretty much, in that church, [and attended] up until you know, I grew up. That's where he and his wife got married, and I think Barry Gordy was there, too, you know, for them.
- 01-01:22:27
Cooks: Incredible!
- 01-01:22:28
Wyatt: Yeah. So that's how it happened. And you know, my parents didn't know who [they were]. They were just new people at the church, so they just invited them over. Because my parents were like head of the Pilgrim Fellowship [group at the church]—
- 01-01:22:39
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-01:22:40
Wyatt: —where the kids got together. So they were pretty active in it.
- 01-01:22:47
Cooks: This sounds like one of these *Forrest Gump* moments that you were talking about earlier.
- 01-01:22:50
Wyatt: Yeah, it really is. Like I say, I just I had no idea. He said, "You ought to write." Because I'd been in groups and all this stuff like that with guys like my buddy, Charles Fearing, the guitar player. We'd get a good drummer and a good bass player, and at least do little gigs around town.
- 01-01:23:12
Cooks: And you played the keyboards?
- 01-01:23:14
Wyatt: Mm-hmm.

- 01-01:23:15
Cooks: But to start as a songwriter with the best, I mean—
- 01-01:23:21
Wyatt: Yeah, it's really—
- 01-01:23:23
Cooks: That's fantastic!
- 01-01:23:23
Wyatt: But he heard something in it. And I think it's the same source—like we talk about media, different media—that's why I say it's like the same source. So he evidently heard something in there that people that were in visual art saw in my work. I think he heard it in the music, yeah. That was the first. The second record was with The Sylvers, "Storybook Girl." Do you remember? You're probably too young for that.
- 01-01:23:53
Cooks: There are some Sylvers songs that I know, like the back of my hand I know. We had a tape that we played and wore out, my sister and I.
- 01-01:24:04
Wyatt: Was it the "Boogie Fever" tape?
- 01-01:24:06
Cooks: We had dance moves. Yes, we did. "Hot Line."
- 01-01:24:09
Wyatt: Yeah. Well, the "Boogie Fever" album, Sylvers, *Showcase*, I have two songs on that. "Storybook Girl" was the biggest one for that, because that's Foster. [Foster Sylvers] was a little kid who's singing lead on it. Now that's an incredible group, The Sylvers, man. They have a really warm sound, you know? Man, they can sing.
- 01-01:24:30
Cooks: And they're a family, and they were from Memphis.
- 01-01:24:33
Wyatt: Yeah, [the first five kids were born in Memphis to parents Leon Sylvers, Jr., and Shirley Sylvers. Leon Sylvers, Jr., was from Memphis, and Shirley Wyble was born in Opelousas, Louisiana. They met at Xavier University in Louisiana.]
- 01-01:24:34
Cooks: That's right.
- 01-01:24:35
Wyatt: Yeah, they were from Memphis, too, so it's like something in the water. [laughs]

- 01-01:24:41
Cooks: Oh okay. Yes, this is really phenomenal.
- 01-01:24:46
Wyatt: And then let's see, then I did some work with my songwriting partner, Kris Young. My very first production in songwriting and arranging then came with Tavares, the group Tavares, and it was a song called "Got to Find My Way Back to You."
- 01-01:25:10
Cooks: And you're doing the music and the lyrics?
- 01-01:25:14
Wyatt: No, Kris Young did the lyrics.
- 01-01:25:16
Cooks: Did the lyrics, okay.
- 01-01:25:17
Wyatt: I just pretty much concentrated on the music. I may tell him lyrics when I'm giving him an idea of what I want to go there, but he would come up with the vision for it, you know—as well as Freddie's wife, Christine. The same thing, yeah.
- 01-01:25:29
Cooks: Okay, now I—
- 01-01:25:30
Wyatt: But she wrote the lyrics on "Storybook Girl," and she also wrote the lyrics on "A Little Bit of Love (Is All It Takes)" for New Edition.
- 01-01:25:36
Cooks: Oh! Yes, okay. We're going to talk more about music, but I have in my notes, thinking about this church: is this where you met your wife? Did you meet her—?
- 01-01:25:50
Wyatt: No.
- 01-01:25:52
Cooks: No, okay.
- 01-01:25:53
Wyatt: I'll tell you. It's a long story. [laughs] Another *Forrest Gump* moment.
- 01-01:25:56
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-01:25:57
Wyatt: I got a scholarship when I first got to UCLA, from the Afro-American Studies Center.

- 01-01:26:06
Cooks: Oh, you did?
- 01-01:26:06
Wyatt: Yeah. It wasn't a big thing, but it was a small scholarship. And my wife, [Joyce Wyatt], also got one. So we actually have a picture of us together, before we start dating and all that. It was like amazing! [laughs]
- 01-01:26:24
Cooks: Of the two scholarship winners.
- 01-01:26:25
Wyatt: Yeah!
- 01-01:26:25
Cooks: Wow.
- 01-01:26:26
Wyatt: And so after that, a mutual friend of mine got married to a friend of hers, and I was in the wedding, and she was like one of bridesmaid things. And she said, "You know, is your name so-and-so?" "Yeah, you go to UCLA?" "Yeah." You know, and so we started talking, and she looked pretty good, so we started talking. And the rest is like history, man. [laughs] Yeah.
- 01-01:26:52
Cooks: So you started dating after college?
- 01-01:26:54
Wyatt: Oh no, no. No, that's the question of my wife. That's where I met my wife. But then I also had girlfriends before I met my wife.
- 01-01:27:08
Cooks: Okay, okay, okay. Yeah.
- 01-01:27:08
Wyatt: No, I started dating when I was like fourteen or fifteen.
- 01-01:27:12
Cooks: Oh my gosh! Well, Richard, yeah! Okay, but you met your wife at college, and then later on you have your life with her.
- 01-01:27:19
Wyatt: Yes, exactly.
- 01-01:27:22
Cooks: Wow. Okay, now I also have a note here, since we were talking about music and art, that you can see colors when you're writing songs?
- 01-01:27:33
Wyatt: Yeah.

01-01:27:35

Cooks: Can you please talk to us about that? Because we've heard of synesthesia before.

01-01:27:38

Wyatt: Yeah, there's a term for it. I didn't even know that term until somebody else told me. Marty Koplín told me that, what that term is, because that's the term for it. When I'm writing, that's one thing. But once I start arranging it and getting the bass and guitar, and then you get strings and horns, there are certain sounds that have a color associated with them. I can't explain it, but once I hear a certain kind of—I see colors once I hear a certain sound, you know? And when I'm creating the arrangements, or even mixing or whatever, and I'm going for a certain affect, it's like once you get mixing, to me it's like glazing in oil. That's the easiest way I can explain it. [laughs] Yeah.

01-01:28:45

Cooks: And has this always been?

01-01:28:48

Wyatt: Well, not until I really started getting serious in music. That's when it really started happening, yeah.

01-01:28:56

Cooks: Okay. Oh, it's so interesting. So when you got further into music, then that affected your art.

01-01:29:04

Wyatt: Yeah! Because to me, it was just the same. I remember I was talking to David [Hammons]. I said, "Man, when I think of you, I think about Thelonious Monk." And Charles White is more like a Miles Davis, you know? [laughs] This is my own thing though, yeah.

01-01:29:27

Cooks: Right.

01-01:29:27

Wyatt: It's like the McCoy Tyner with painting, yeah.

01-01:29:31

Cooks: Sure, but I wonder if there's a level of—it's a conceptual approach.

01-01:29:37

Wyatt: Yeah, very much.

01-01:29:38

Cooks: And so much of it is abstract, you know?

01-01:29:41

Wyatt: Yeah. I mean you know, the story I tell: I got kicked out of a class at UCLA.

- 01-01:29:49
Cooks: What? [laughs]
- 01-01:29:50
Wyatt: And yeah, it was mutual. I really wasn't wild about the class, and but it wasn't like hard feelings. It was just mutual. He says, "Well, I don't think you need to." And I said, "Yeah, you're right. I'm outta here." But the best thing that happened is that I wound up in this class called "New Forms and Concepts," and the teacher was Gary Lloyd. [laughs]
- 01-01:30:19
Cooks: Oh wow!
- 01-01:30:21
Wyatt: That was like the best!
- 01-01:30:21
Cooks: My gosh!
- 01-01:30:23
Wyatt: The best, absolute best thing that could happen for me at that point in my life, because Gary was just, he was incredible. I mean, his headgear—[or high intellect]—was really shocking. He obviously knew Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, he knew all the people, he knew all the conceptual forerunners during that whole period. They would actually come and do lectures and talk about their work.
- 01-01:30:49
Cooks: Really?
- 01-01:30:49
Wyatt: Yeah, it was great. Yeah. That's why I have a love for conceptual art, you know, a great love for it. A lot of contemporary stuff. And like I say, I employ a little bit of it in my work or when I'm doing drawings or whatever. But I have done some installations.
- 01-01:31:12
Cooks: We're going to talk about all of that, because I'm so fascinated with that, that you can bring in abstraction and conceptual approaches. I mean, yes, I think immediately we say, "He's a figurative artist," when you—
- 01-01:31:29
Wyatt: Oh yeah.
- 01-01:31:31
Cooks: But then, there's something that happens when are looking at your art and when you're creating it, which I want to get to, as well, that's not—it's not direct, one to one.
- 01-01:31:42
Wyatt: Right.

- 01-01:31:43
Cooks: It's not a copying kind of a process.
- 01-01:31:46
Wyatt: No, no.
- 01-01:31:48
Cooks: In a way that I think people think about, what that must be like, to have that talent? Okay. So you did mention that you had one of your teachers, I think at Chouinard, who would take the students on field trips to galleries and—
- 01-01:32:11
Wyatt: Yeah, that was Alice Beamish.
- 01-01:32:12
Cooks: Okay. And I wonder if you remember seeing art by other artists in galleries and museums.
- 01-01:32:19
Wyatt: Oh yeah, definitely. In fact, back in the sixties, on Tuesday evenings, there was an art walk on La Cienega [Blvd.], because all the galleries were between Melrose [Ave.] and—
- 01-01:32:33
Cooks: Going north.
- 01-01:32:33
Wyatt: Yeah, Melrose going north to Santa Monica [Blvd.]. And yeah, all these galleries there, and we would go and, you know, we'd just go! Dad would take me, and we would just go and—
- 01-01:32:51
Cooks: Your dad would take you?
- 01-01:32:51
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah.
- 01-01:32:52
Cooks: So you got your parents into visual art?
- 01-01:32:54
Wyatt: Yeah, they got into it because I was into it.
- 01-01:32:56
Cooks: Right.
- 01-01:32:58
Wyatt: They started seeing all the different work. And so their appreciation for it came as a result of me being involved in it, you know? Yeah.
- 01-01:33:14
Cooks: How supportive!

- 01-01:33:16
Wyatt: Yeah. My parents are special parents. [laughs]
- 01-01:33:22
Cooks: Wow! I think about one of the famous galleries being Ferus Gallery. Did you ever walk in there?
- 01-01:33:30
Wyatt: I think so, but I didn't spend—the galleries that I liked and that I later wound up having shows: there was Heritage Gallery, Ben Horowitz.
- 01-01:33:42
Cooks: Yes.
- 01-01:33:43
Wyatt: He actually represented me for a couple years there. And then there was Ankrum Gallery, Joan Ankrum. She had everybody like Suzanne Jackson and a lot of people there, too. But these are some of the first galleries that I can remember that showed people of color. I know that Ferus had Bereal, Ed Bereal, there, I think, for a while.
- 01-01:34:06
Cooks: Yes, Ed Bereal, right. He taught at UC Irvine, too.
- 01-01:34:10
Wyatt: Yeah. I remember that. Yeah, I think he was on his way out when I was teaching there.
- 01-01:34:15
Cooks: Yes. When I got there, I think that was his last year. Okay.
- 01-01:34:24
Wyatt: And then I knew that Ulysses [Jenkins] was there, and Joe Lewis—I know Joe. He's still there, right?
- 01-01:34:31
Cooks: Yeah, he's still there in the Art Department, yeah. Did you ever go to—I guess then it was the County Museum, [now LACMA, Los Angeles County Museum of Art]?
- 01-01:34:41
Wyatt: Yeah, sure did. But in fact, as a kid, I remember my dad—because he was always trying to—you know, they were like real forward thinking, my parents. So we went to see the Ed Kienholz sculpture, *Back Seat Dodge* ['38].
- 01-01:35:01
Cooks: Oh, you did? Wow!
- 01-01:35:01
Wyatt: Yeah, there was like a long line. I remember waiting in line to go see it. It was like a big deal about it, because it was a couple getting it on in the back seat of

a [a car]. That's why he called it *Back Seat Dodge*. But it was like real controversial at the time and everything. I remember doing that.

01-01:35:18

Cooks: Wow.

01-01:35:16

Wyatt: Yeah. And then as I got older, though, thirteen or fourteen or so, Cecil Ferguson and Claude Booker were working at the museum, so a lot of shows that I wanted to see, you know, I would go in through the service entrance and they would get me in, so I didn't have to pay for it. [laughs]

01-01:35:35

Cooks: That's so great.

01-01:35:36

Wyatt: Yeah, I saw some good stuff, some good shows there.

01-01:35:38

Cooks: They were art preparators together, at the time.

01-01:35:41

Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah.

01-01:35:43

Cooks: And so you knew them. It was before *Panorama*.

01-01:35:47

Wyatt: Yes, before *Panorama*.

01-01:35:47

Cooks: Yeah, you were already part of their community.

01-01:35:49

Wyatt: Yeah, and they were consultants for the James Earl Jones *Black Omnibus*. You're probably too young to remember that.

01-01:35:58

Cooks: What was it, the Black what?

01-01:35:59

Wyatt: Black Omnibus.

01-01:36:01

Cooks: No, I don't know that.

01-01:36:01

Wyatt: And what it was, James Earl Jones was the host, and Cecil and Claude would often have artwork on when he would introduce acts. And they worked it out where they had, I mean, everybody. They had my work there, and I had this one piece that was a painting there. And I was really surprised, because he actually mentioned my name.

- 01-01:36:23
Cooks: James Earl Jones said your name?
- 01-01:36:25
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 01-01:36:26
Cooks: Wow!
- 01-01:36:27
Wyatt: If you look at my Instagram, I've got it posted on there. And you'll see a picture of him, and he was introducing, I think, Esther Phillips or somebody in the—yeah.
- 01-01:36:41
Cooks: And what channel was this, was it 13?
- 01-01:36:43
Wyatt: It was on Channel 11. It was a local channel.
- 01-01:36:44
Cooks: Okay, KTTV or—
- 01-01:36:46
Wyatt: KTTV, exactly, at that time.
- 01-01:36:47
Cooks: Got it.
- 01-01:36:50
Wyatt: Yeah, Channel 11.
- 01-01:36:51
Cooks: Oh my goodness! I didn't know anything about that.
- 01-01:36:53
Wyatt: Well yeah.
- 01-01:36:55
Cooks: So it sounds like they—
- 01-01:36:56
Wyatt: It was a good show. I mean, they had a lot of good people. They interviewed Richard Pryor. They had Charles White on the show. It was a pretty good show.
- 01-01:37:04
Cooks: Wow. And it sounds like one of those opportunities just to try to showcase Black talent in multiple forms.
- 01-01:37:13
Wyatt: Yeah, it was. I mean, that's basically what it was. They'd also have literary folks on the show. They had Alex Haley and Sarah Vaughan. And so it was

real diverse, in terms of a focus. It was arts. A lot of it was focused on performing art. They had Paula Kelly. They had like these different groups from stage doing different acts. It was a good show, yeah.

01-01:37:44

Cooks: I have to look this up for sure.

01-01:37:46

Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah.

01-01:37:46

Cooks: And all of these were in LA. That's the thing.

01-01:37:50

Wyatt: Well, they were all over.

01-01:37:50

Cooks: Oh, they were? Okay.

01-01:37:52

Wyatt: Yeah, the artists were pretty much in LA.

01-01:37:54

Cooks: Yes.

01-01:37:55

Wyatt: Because they used all the artists from—like I say, Claude and Cecil, they knew everybody. Yeah.

01-01:38:02

Cooks: Sure. Wow. Okay, now I have noted another exhibition that you were in as a child at the Los Angeles Bahá'í Center. In 1969 you were thirteen. How did you come to participate in this show?

01-01:38:23

Wyatt: That was through John Outterbridge.

01-01:38:27

Cooks: Okay.

01-01:38:27

Wyatt: Yeah, John Outterbridge had suggested to people that, "This kid, you should see his stuff," and that's how that happened. But that's all I really remember. I remember that show, and I remember that John Outterbridge made it happen with that.

01-01:38:39

Cooks: What was the artwork?

01-01:38:41

Wyatt: I can't remember, really. [laughs]

- 01-01:38:42
Cooks: Okay, all right.
- 01-01:38:44
Wyatt: So much, you know?
- 01-01:38:45
Cooks: Did you keep working in chalk? Or when you did the Dr. King—
- 01-01:38:53
Wyatt: In chalk?
- 01-01:38:53
Cooks: Yes. Was that your first time working in chalk? You just picked it up?
- 01-01:38:56
Wyatt: Oh no, I'd worked with chalk before, but not on the street. That's the first time I used chalk on the street.
- 01-01:39:01
Cooks: On paper you were using that.
- 01-01:39:03
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah.
- 01-01:39:04
Cooks: Like in a more Renaissance kind of a—
- 01-01:39:06
Wyatt: Yeah. Or just that and more expressive. Because the teacher I told you about at Chouinard when I was a kid, Alice Beamish, she was really into oil pastels. We used those. But she was more into expressive kind of—yeah. So I learned a lot from that.
- 01-01:39:28
Cooks: Do you think she was coming out of abstract expressionism?
- 01-01:39:34
Wyatt: She was, her bent was toward that, which was cool. And that's something I would stress to my students, as well, too: if you have an opportunity to learn something, learn it. You may not use it right away, but you might later on.
- 01-01:39:56
A classic example: I remember when I was working at the studio, recording studio, where I was doing stuff. And the person who had the studio said, "Well, we're going to have a CPR day," a day for doing CPR and learn about it. And they had somebody come in and teach you all this stuff, and taught everything from Heimlich, all that stuff like that. But anyway, a couple of years ago I was at this restaurant, and I was like, Man, this lady—it was a group of three elder Latino ladies, and they were eating. And the one lady jumped up and, you know, her friend, "Oh, oh!" You could tell it was like

panic going on. And then one other lady said, "¡Ayúdame, ayúdame!" Which means, "Help, help me." So I said to the waiter, I said, "Look, she's—" so I just ran over there, and just gave her the thing, and it just popped out.

01-01:40:58

Cooks: Are you kidding?

01-01:40:59

Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

01-01:40:59

Cooks: Richard!

01-01:41:01

Wyatt: Yeah. Because that's something I learned in 19[7]9, and I did that like around 2018, when I actually used it. But I learned it in 1979.

01-01:41:18

Cooks: You saved this woman's life at a restaurant.

01-01:41:20

Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah. She needed help, so I just did what I learned, and it popped out.

01-01:41:29

Cooks: And then—

01-01:41:29

Wyatt: When I left they were real appreciative, and, "Oh, thank you, thank you." So that was cool. [laughs]

01-01:41:37

Cooks: You just jumped into action and saved this woman's life.

01-01:41:44

Wyatt: Yeah, I mean, you know, other people—I thought the waiters—and they were standing around like—yeah, yeah, yeah.

01-01:41:49

Cooks: Oh no. Wow. Okay, now I totally forgot where we were. So we were talking about abstraction, and so later on you said—

01-01:42:02

Wyatt: Right, and so what I said was that—

01-01:42:02

Cooks: A recording studio.

01-01:42:03

Wyatt: Yeah. I said that, because you had mentioned learning different things, and then I said, "Yeah, well, I welcome learning different things." Even if I don't find it useful, or even if I'm not that much interested in it, it doesn't hurt just to

learn it anyway. Because you don't know, you might use it one day, or you may not, but it just helps to just learn it.

01-01:42:26

Cooks: And abstraction has been useful for you.

01-01:42:29

Wyatt: Oh yeah, especially when I started doing murals. Even though the work is real representational, there's illusion involved in it. Up close, it's very abstract. Yeah.

01-01:42:47

Cooks: Okay. I wanted to, I guess, just get down for the record. At this point, even as a teenager, you're working in—or have worked in—chalk, in different forms.

01-01:43:01

Wyatt: Mm-hmm.

01-01:43:01

Cooks: Pencil, charcoal.

01-01:43:04

Wyatt: Mm-hmm.

01-01:43:05

Cooks: And then you start painting when you're at college. So let's—

01-01:43:09

Wyatt: Yeah, pretty much. I mean, I did a little painting in high school, but I wasn't as serious about painting until I got to college.

01-01:43:19

Cooks: Okay.

01-01:43:18

Wyatt: Because I had a really good teacher, my painting teacher, yeah.

01-01:43:22

Cooks: So you go to college in 1974?

01-01:43:25

Wyatt: No, I went to college in 1973.

01-01:43:27

Cooks: Okay.

01-01:43:28

Wyatt: And I graduated in '78.

01-01:43:30

Cooks: Okay.

- 01-01:43:31
Wyatt: Should have been '77, but you know. [laughs]
- 01-01:43:34
Cooks: All right, 1973. And you get some money from African American Studies. And you went as an art major?
- 01-01:43:44
Wyatt: Mm-hmm.
- 01-01:43:45
Cooks: Okay. And were there other classes that you also took, too?
- 01-01:43:50
Wyatt: Yeah. Well, besides the arts, I had this class called "Communication Studies," and that was really a good class, because the professor that taught the class—I'm trying to think of the right words for it—statistical, in terms of her whole approach to it.
- 01-01:44:15
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-01:44:15
Wyatt: One thing she had us do was like go to a freeway overpass and take pictures of cars at so many minutes and between so many intervals. And what happened is we brought the photographs back, and what happens is that you notice that there are certain patterns in the traffic. And that was one thing I learned. And then there was also another thing about sampling systems, like what kind of sampling systems—when you see a poll, was it random? Was it a true experiment? You know, there are different types of sampling. So that all was interesting to me at that time.
- 01-01:44:55
Cooks: Now artwise, I took—at that time they called it "Oceanic Art History," and it was really good, because it was aboriginal work. What was really interesting to me—and it was kind of like the precursor to doing murals and doing work in public places—was that the art evolved around your culture. It wasn't like, you know, let's be in a studio for whatever, and then you show at a gallery. The art actually evolved around the culture. You know, you have the Wandjina cave paintings, and you have the circle drawings right in the dirt. So that really interested me. And consequently, that's why I started doing murals while I'm still in college in 1976, because I wanted to create work where people actually live. That was my thinking in that whole process, you know?
- 01-01:45:50
Cooks: Wow. And when you started at UCLA, again, you had already been showing for many years.
- 01-01:46:01
Wyatt: Yeah, they were group shows.

- 01-01:46:03
Cooks: Right. One of the shows that I wanted to make sure I didn't skip over was the *Panorama* show. And I know we talked a little bit about how young you were in that exhibition. Could you talk a bit about *Grandma's Hands*? There's a song "Grandma's Hands."
- 01-01:46:26
Wyatt: No actually, I did that before the song.
- 01-01:46:29
Cooks: All right, come on!
- 01-01:46:30
Wyatt: Yeah, really.
- 01-01:46:31
Cooks: Really?
- 01-01:46:32
Wyatt: My parents, everybody's my witness I did that before the song "Grandma's Hands." But actually, I got that image from this book called—it was a photography book called *The Family of Man*.
- 01-01:46:45
Cooks: Yes!
- 01-01:46:44
Wyatt: But it was real popular then, and I saw a lady's hands in that, and the drawing was based on that.
- 01-01:46:52
Cooks: Wow.
- 01-01:46:52
Wyatt: Yeah, and that was like—wow, I think that was '68 or something.
- 01-01:46:57
Cooks: That was a very famous photography show.
- 01-01:47:00
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 01-01:47:00
Cooks: And the show, I thought, happened in the fifties. I want to say '55, yeah.
- 01-01:47:04
Wyatt: Yeah, but the book was like really just—I mean, I fell in love with the book.
- 01-01:47:08
Cooks: Yes.
- 01-01:47:09
Wyatt: And because the images were so clear in what they captured, really.

- 01-01:47:13
Cooks: Very powerful.
- 01-01:47:15
Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- 01-01:47:15
Cooks: And sort of universal: family and culture. And you did that, okay, based on a photograph before the song. [laughs] Incredible.
- 01-01:47:26
Wyatt: Yeah. I just used the book, and I just called it *Grandma's Hands*.
- 01-01:47:32
Cooks: Wow, okay. Do you have any memories of the curator, of Carroll Greene? He was based in D.C. He was a part of the local—
- 01-01:47:43
Wyatt: No, not really. The only recollection that I have is actually meeting him at the reception, and then we took a picture together.
- 01-01:47:52
Cooks: Okay. [laughs]
- 01-01:47:54
Wyatt: And that was it. I don't really—
- 01-01:48:00
Cooks: Okay, I also have noted—you know, you've done so much work, and I know we don't have time to talk about everything, but I'm tempted to.
- 01-01:48:10
Wyatt: [laughs] Yeah.
- 01-01:48:11
Cooks: So the Jewish Community Center, was it an art show?
- 01-01:48:15
Wyatt: Yeah, it was an art show.
- 01-01:48:17
Cooks: Okay, it wasn't a mural commission.
- 01-01:48:19
Wyatt: No, no, no. This was an actual art show.
- 01-01:48:22
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-01:48:21
Wyatt: And that was cool, because I did that through—when I was going to Fairfax High School, and they invited a bunch of kids to show there and wanted to do this, yeah.

- 01-01:48:34
Cooks: And where is that? Is that on Olympic [Blvd.]? Is it the one that's still there?
- 01-01:48:39
Wyatt: I think it was on Olympic. Yeah.
- 01-01:48:42
Cooks: I know so much of your work—
- 01-01:48:45
Wyatt: It's my old stomping ground over there. [laughs]
- 01-01:48:45
Cooks: Yes.
- 01-01:48:47
Wyatt: I spent a lot of time over there.
- 01-01:48:48
Cooks: I know so much of your work, and I've been, in preparation for our time together, have been sort of mapping your LA, and it's just so capacious, because, you know, we're a very multicultural place.
- 01-01:49:05
Wyatt: Oh yeah.
- 01-01:49:06
Cooks: We're also segregated. And you have been to places in LA that I think a lot of Angelenos haven't. They just wouldn't go over there, because they're over here.
- 01-01:49:18
Wyatt: Right, right.
- 01-01:49:18
Cooks: You know, and your LA is very cross-cultural. You know the city.
- 01-01:49:25
Wyatt: Yeah, that's how I grew up, that's how I grew up. A lot of it the way my parents raised us, my sister and me. They raised us around a lot of culture and a lot of diversity. And then when I went to Tutor/Art, the same thing. I mean, you had students from all over—Asian, Latino, you know?
- 01-01:49:49
Cooks: Yeah, and that wasn't your neighborhood.
- 01-01:49:50
Wyatt: No, no, and the thing is, is that it's easy for me to develop a concept around that, because I've got so many friends that are from different cultures and different backgrounds. But what I do is I do a lot of research. If it's a public work and it's going at a real specific site, then what I do is I like to research that site. What was it before? Like when I did a piece in Watts, and I went

back—because a lot of people don't know that in Watts at that time, they had a big Jewish community. There was like a lot of German folks there, I think. But they also had Will Rogers Park, and it's something else—Ted Watkins Park—now. But at one point in time, the Will Rogers Park was actually a huge Japanese horticultural center there. And so there's just like so many cultures that are constantly overlapping. Even before the term "multicultural" came, I was always interested in that kind of overlapping of cultures, and always just tried to do my best to really kind of make a statement about it.

01-01:51:08

Cooks: Because there's so many layers to Los Angeles that you—

01-01:51:15

Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah!

01-01:51:15

Cooks: So when we look at your work, we're looking at that research that you've done into those layers. I'm going to ask one more question, then we're going to take a break. Also in 1971, before you got to college, you were part of a traveling exhibition for Security Pacific National Bank.

01-01:51:39

Wyatt: Right, right.

01-01:51:40

Cooks: Now, what was that? That wasn't a mural?

01-01:51:43

Wyatt: No, no. That was an actual exhibition that was sponsored by Security National Bank at that time—Pacific—I forget the name.

01-01:51:49

Cooks: Yeah, Security Pacific. I remember their logo. It was blue and black, it was an "s."

01-01:51:58

Wyatt: Yeah, there was like a lot of artists. I mean, everybody was in the show, with the regular Betye Saar, Timothy Washington, Charles Dickson, Samella Lewis. I mean, it's everybody who was in our—that was a wonderful period of time, because there weren't a lot of venues in that whole period. Whenever there was a show that included African American artists, everybody showed up to support it. Like when they had a show someplace, everybody'd all show up, so you'd see everybody there. I just remember that distinctly. Anytime there was a chance for all of us to get together, then we'd get together. Of course, I would have to go with my parents. [laughs] But I do remember that very distinctly, that it was always a joy to be around all the different artists.

01-01:52:58

Cooks: And they embraced you.

- 01-01:53:01
Wyatt: Yeah, pretty much. You know, they looked out.
- 01-01:53:04
Cooks: They could see you as the next generation. Yeah, and you admired their work.
- 01-01:53:11
Wyatt: Yeah. Like I say, there were a lot of artists that I just really admired, and they played a part in my development, just from observation. Like I spent some time with David [Hammons] in New York when the retrospective, *Charles White: A Retrospective*, was at MoMA [Museum of Modern Art]. And I said, "You know, it was really cool talking with you at this, because I was a kid back then." He's real cool, he's just really cool. He just stays to himself, good sense of humor, you know? He just does his own thing. [laughs] Because we were young when we were there. Ian White—because we all stayed in the same hotel. Ian called and said we were going to go to dinner, right?
- 01-01:54:02
And so we all go. And it's like Ulysses was there, Suzanne Jackson. So we go out to this Italian restaurant in Harlem, and the food was just the best food, man! I mean, everybody was just enjoying themselves. Sitting there and it's like someone walks in past me, and it was David. And so we hung out, he's having a good time. And he invited us all back to his studio space, which was really cool, because Ian had some of his students from school there, so it was good for them to see that, you know, and somebody at that level. I mean, he was like just really gracious. You know, David's pretty—not reclusive, but he's like, no, he doesn't hang out. So it was like really a treat to—yeah.
- 01-01:54:54
Cooks: Right yeah. I don't know him, but he seems to not need the art world or need anything or anyone.
- 01-01:55:01
Wyatt: Yeah no, he just does his thing. And I think it's a healthy attitude, but it also helps to have the talent that he has. Everybody can't do that, [laughs] you know?
- 01-01:55:16
Cooks: Right.
- 01-01:55:16
Wyatt: But it really does help. And me coming up, even before I knew what all that meant, I was just really just focusing on the work. That's the most important thing. Because somebody'd come along and like it, and the next week, they don't or whatever. But if you focus on the work—and that's something that Charles White instilled in me: always do your best work. Yeah, you may not hit it out of the park every time, but when you set standards for yourself, then that's really important. And he was right, he was really right.

01-01:55:58

Cooks:

Okay. So we'll stop here. And when we come back, I do want to get back to college, and then we'll start from there.

01-01:56:05

Wyatt:

Oh okay, sounds good. What time is it now?

01-01:56:06

Tewes:

All right, let's pause now.

Interview 2: February 6, 2023

02-00:00:00

Tewes: This is a second interview with Richard Wyatt, Jr., for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes on February 6, 2023 in Los Angeles, California. Take it away, Bridget.

02-00:00:20

Cooks: Okay. So I wanted us to keep talking a bit about UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles].

02-00:00:25

Wyatt: Okay.

02-00:00:27

Cooks: And I wanted to hear you talk about May Sun, who is such an important person for the rest of your life, who you met there.

02-00:00:35

Wyatt: Oh yeah. My sister. [laughs] I call her "mi hija." [laughs] When I was at UCLA, it was around 1975, '76. And I always tell this story. I saw her walking, I was right behind her, and she was going into the elevator, and I just remember the first impression was like her hair was, you know, it was long and everything. And so we walked and we spoke, and then we go into the same class. And you know, we just kind of like just hit it off right off the bat. I mean, I wasn't trying to talk with her or anything, we just hit it off. And so there was an assignment where you had to use a big mirror to do a self-portrait of yourself, and I didn't have one and she didn't have one. And so I said, "Look, why don't you just come over to my house, and we just draw each other?" And we did. And she still has those drawings, actually, too.

02-00:01:34

Cooks: Wow.

02-00:01:34

Wyatt: And so that's how it worked out, and we've been friends ever since. But her sensibility is kind of like—she's real smart, man. Really just incredibly—and I don't use that loosely, but she's like really, really smart. It's always a pleasure to work with her when we work, because we look at things different ways, and we really think about things, think about the space and, you know, What's the approach for fabrication or whatever, or, What do we want to say? I really enjoy working with her like that.

02-00:02:09

And so what happened is we worked at UCLA, and then I didn't see her for a few years. I was having lunch down on Central, the seafood [restaurant], Fisherman's. You know what I'm talking about. It's off Central and—

02-00:02:26

Cooks: Downtown?

02-00:02:26

Wyatt: Downtown. It's really popular. It's like outside seating, and they've got clam chowder. It's really quite famous, and it's called the Fisherman's Outlet [Restaurant and Seafood Market] or something like that.

02-00:02:36

Cooks: Oh, I don't know. I know the Grand Central Market, but that's—

02-00:02:38

Wyatt: No, not that. It's iconic. And so I was with a group of friends of mine, and they were just eating. And someone said, "Richard," and I looked around and it was her. And so we're talking and catching up, and she said, "I want to invite you to this play," because she's working at the Mark Taper Forum at the time—

02-00:02:55

Cooks: Okay.

02-00:02:57

Wyatt: —you know, doing posters. She says, "I want you to see this play by this writer. His name is George Wolfe." And it was *The Colored Museum*, and it was like incredible, man! [laughs] We went back, and me and my wife saw it, and I took my parents.

02-00:03:14

Cooks: Wow!

02-00:03:16

Wyatt: And it was really good. So that's when we started talking again, keeping up. And this opportunity came up for Union Station. She says, "Let's team up on it and do a thing on that, and see what we come up with." Because at the very least, they paid you for being a finalist. And so we said, "Once we finish, we'll go to Hawaii." And so we went.

02-00:03:48

Cooks: Wow!

02-00:03:48

Wyatt: The reason why we went to Hawaii, because the guy who was on our team, Paul Diez, he was working over in Hawaii, in Oahu.

02-00:03:56

Cooks: Okay.

02-00:03:56

Wyatt: And he was working on some kind of transportation thing there. And it was really sad, because like the day we got there, they had just canceled the program, so he was like kind of stuck out there.

- 02-00:04:07
Cooks: What, they canceled which program?
- 02-00:04:09
Wyatt: Yeah, it was a program in Oahu. It was some kind of transportation—
- 02-00:04:16
Cooks: And that's where—
- 02-00:04:16
Wyatt: And he was working on that.
- 02-00:04:18
Cooks: Got it.
- 02-00:04:18
Wyatt: Yeah. And so we got there, and there was a big thing in the paper, and so he was kind of bummed out. But we still wound up working on [the Union Station Project]. So we were there for about a week, and we worked on the whole thing. And then got back, and then we did our presentation, and finally we got it. That was for Union Station.
- 02-00:04:36
Cooks: Were you invited to apply for that? Was there a call?
- 02-00:04:40
Wyatt: No, there was a call, there was a call for it. Now, for the Kennedy project [*Ripple of Hope* at the Robert F. Kennedy Inspiration Park entryway], we were invited for that, yeah, because we had worked together. And then we did a show at The Armory [Center for the Arts] together when they had the installation [at LAX Los Angeles Biennial].
- 02-00:04:50
Cooks: Wow, okay.
- 02-00:04:53
Wyatt: And there's a catalog somewhere.
- 02-00:04:57
Cooks: When you were in college, did you, or did May, think of yourselves as artists, or were you painters or were you multimedia?
- 02-00:05:09
Wyatt: Because she had Gary Lloyd, too, so we were both painting and drawing, because her father was an artist.
- 02-00:05:16
Cooks: Oh!

- 02-00:05:18
Wyatt: Yeah, and her mother was this really fantastic pianist, too. Her story is really interesting, in terms of how they left China and got over here, because I think the father sent the family over first, and then they came afterwards.
- 02-00:05:35
Cooks: Okay.
- 02-00:05:36
Wyatt: But you know, were both painting and drawing, you know? But once we hit Gary Lloyd's class, that was it. It was like just this whole 'nother space and thought, in terms of artwork. And we loved it, we ate it up. In fact, May went to get her master's at Otis [Art Institute], and she was wondering what she was going to do and how; you know, what she was going to pursue, in terms of that. And it winds up that Gary Lloyd was teaching over there, and so she wound up taking Gary Lloyd.
- 02-00:06:10
Cooks: Wow.
- 02-00:06:11
Wyatt: Yeah. Man, he was great. He was a good teacher.
- 02-00:06:14
Cooks: I wanted to think about how your work developed when you got to college. You said earlier that that's when you got serious about painting?
- 02-00:06:24
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 02-00:06:26
Cooks: Can you talk to us about that? Was it serious, like really focusing on this as a media, or serious you were using oils and acrylics, or what?
- 02-00:06:36
Wyatt: Yeah. Well, I had always used them, but I had teachers that were showing me new stuff with it, which is good. And they were figurative painters, too. One was Richard Joseph, and the other one was James Valerio, who was really good.
- 02-00:06:50
Cooks: Okay.
- 02-00:06:52
Wyatt: And so I really got into painting, because I was learning stuff about painting. Drawing, I had that pretty much nailed, you know? [laughs] At the time I was in the show—but I'll get back to it—but I was in this show at Barnsdall [Art Park]. It was like an open kind of call thing, but there was a purchase prize involved in it, you know? And so I did this series of drawings, and it's me chewing bread. It's called *I Like Bread*, and it's different points of me, five different images of me chewing bread, almost like a film pan thing. But it was

inspired by conceptualism and all that stuff. And then I won the purchase award, and found out later that some of my teachers were in it, and they didn't even win.

02-00:07:40

Cooks: Oh, you're kidding!

02-00:07:41

Wyatt: Yeah. So drawing was cool. Painting was something that was really new to me, in terms of—I mean, I use it, but not to the extent or to the development where these guys were. They would force you to look at—you know, slow down, and it was really an observation. And so that's where that happened for me, yeah.

02-00:08:03

Cooks: Wow. And I'm just wondering: for many artists, drawing is the first step before they do a painting. And that's likely true for you. But drawing is its own art, it's not just a step to something else. How do you find it is to sort of translate a drawing into painting? What is that like?

02-00:08:34

Wyatt: I mean, there's no standard in any of these things—drawing or painting, whatever. When I was younger, I was told that I was drawing with the paint, more than just laying layers of paint. And the instructor was right, because I was drawing with the paint. But it's not a bad thing, it's just something that I was doing, that I needed to learn another approach to it. I was just open to learning another approach to that. So I don't think of it as a bad thing or anything else. When I do drawings, my drawings take a tremendous amount of time. They're very labor intensive, and I like to spend that amount of time on each drawing—or painting, for that matter. Because what happens is when you work on something for a long period of time, your attitude changes from day to day, you know, and it's reflected in the work. It's like, even if I'm working outside on a mural—and I may spend six months on it—the light's not consistent from day to day. It's different light, so I'm painting in these different light sources. Then my attitude changes. I could have just had an argument with my wife or something like that, [laughs] and you know, and I've got to paint. It's a great day. I don't want to go out. [Cooks laughs] So the attitude changes from day to day, and I think it's reflected in the work, when you work like that.

02-00:10:04

Cooks: It's interesting, because I'm thinking about you painting figures, then I think about sort of transferring all that emotion to different stages emotionally or psychologically that you go to, and you're bringing that to the work. It sort of gives that psychological depth to that person, and the longer we look, the more we—

02-00:10:29

Wyatt: You see.

02-00:10:30

Cooks: Yes.

02-00:10:31

Wyatt: And that's the whole purpose of it. Because as a kid, I used to love to go to museums and just look at paintings for just hours, man. It's like amazing what they did, you know, a piece of clothing or whatever.

02-00:10:45

Cooks: What was your favorite museum growing up?

02-00:10:48

Wyatt: I went to the [Los Angeles] County [Museum of Art] a lot because of the connection. I'm still really connected with the County Museum of Art

02-00:10:58

Cooks: There's Pasadena.

02-00:10:59

Wyatt: Yeah, I used to like the Norton Simon.

02-00:11:01

Cooks: Norton Simon Museum.

02-00:11:02

Wyatt: Yeah, I used to love it, because I like the paintings in there. The paintings are really good in there.

02-00:11:06

Cooks: Yes.

02-00:11:08

Wyatt: The one thing, though—and this is kind of a precursor to talking about Europe, when I traveled over there—I think I was talking to Amanda about that in our phone interview—is that I learned, when I went over to Europe, that everything is edited that we see. For instance, if you take like Monet's *Haystacks [Series]*, right, they were painted outdoors, you know? Later, they were brought into an interior. That's one edit. [laughs] And then if it's like a museum or a gallery, they've got artificial lights. That's another one. And then if they photograph it, that's like a whole other edit. And then printing it to a book, you know? So by the time you get from life, where they were naturally painted, to a book, there's like a lot lost in the editing.

02-00:12:16

Cooks: It's been mediated.

02-00:12:16

Wyatt: Yeah, and then plus, whoever develops it, in terms of the book or whatever or printmaking media, there's personal priorities or preferences that people like, in how they want to see their photograph, how they want to see the photograph look. So you have that, as well, too. So it's like it's all edited. And

so I like to say that once I went over to Europe, there were a lot of paintings that I saw that I've seen in books for years; some that I loved in print, and then when I saw them in person, I wasn't that wild about.

02-00:12:52

Cooks: Wow.

02-00:12:53

Wyatt: And then there were some that I saw where I wasn't that wild about [in the books], but I loved them [in person]. Because of that editing process, when you actually get the chance to see it, it makes a big difference.

02-00:13:03

Cooks: It's totally different.

02-00:13:04

Wyatt: Yeah.

02-00:13:05

Cooks: So you—

02-00:13:06

Tewes: Actually, sorry, guys, can we pause for one moment? [break in recording] All right, okay, we are back from a break. Go ahead, Bridget.

02-00:13:12

Cooks: So, Richard, you started UCLA in '73, and then was it after your first year in 1974 that you went to Europe?

02-00:13:22

Wyatt: Yeah, what happened was that Europe was a thing that I wanted to do for years, just like I wanted to go to Africa. But Europe was one of the things that—well, I still haven't been to Africa yet, but I want to go. [laughs] But because of all the artwork there, in terms of my knowledge of art, at that point in time, I really wanted to go there. So what happened was that I had an art show at the house, and I sold enough drawings and paintings—

02-00:13:56

Cooks: At this house?

02-00:13:56

Wyatt: At this house, yeah.

02-00:13:57

Cooks: At the house we're in right now.

02-00:13:59

Wyatt: This house we're in right now. And I sold enough to go, and it was like a package deal, because I had a cousin who was a photographer in Germany, in Dusseldorf, and his name was Harlan Ross Feltus. He's had work and a lot of stuff over there, but he's primarily into commercial artmaking—posters and

calendars. He did a lot of work for Ton Sur Ton at the time. That was his work. If you remember that clothing line, Ton Sur Ton back in the eighties?

02-00:14:33

Cooks: No!

02-00:14:35

Wyatt: From '79 to '80. He did a lot of stuff for that.

02-00:14:39

Cooks: Okay.

02-00:14:39

Wyatt: But anyway, he went over there during the sixties, and he married a German woman over there, and they had two daughters. The eldest one is Hannah, and the youngest one is Barbara, and Barbara married Boris Becker, so that's— they're divorced now, but—

02-00:14:57

Cooks: Oh my gosh!

02-00:15:00

Wyatt: So that's just another side story. But anyway, that was like home base for us in Germany. And he told us how to get along, in terms of transportation and all, and what to take, because the Eurail system was real big, and you could get around on that. And we just backpacked through there. And we were all just nineteen.

02-00:15:21

Cooks: And so who did you go with? So you had a cousin who was there, but who did you go with?

02-00:15:24

Wyatt: Yeah, I went with a buddy of mine from high school, Mark Glick; and another buddy of mine from Tutor/Art Program, Kirk Silsbee. So we all just saved up, and when we wanted to go, we went, and it was great. It was like, whew! To this day, we still talk about how that was one of the best experiences in our life, man! I mean, we went to a lot of different museums. Just being over there, you know, and going to Venice and Rome and the—

02-00:15:57

Cooks: You were eighteen, nineteen?

02-00:15:58

Wyatt: Yeah, nineteen, nineteen.

02-00:16:00

Cooks: Nineteen.

02-00:16:01

Wyatt: And the Vatican, and seeing the Sistine Chapel, and going to the Louvre.

02-00:16:06

Cooks: So you were there a while then, if you're—

02-00:16:08

Wyatt: Yeah, we were there for about a month. When you think about those countries, you think like the States, you know? But they're a lot closer than you think. You can catch one Eurail train to another city, and sometimes in a matter of hours, sometimes it takes days. I mean, we went from Paris to—oh, what was it—to Spain. I think that took a while. But Spain was like the best, man. We went to Barcelona. The food, and we met some girls there. So yeah, we were like nineteen, so it was like really just a blast, you know? [laughs] Yeah, it was a blast.

02-00:16:57

Cooks: Do you cook?

02-00:16:59

Wyatt: No, I don't cook.

02-00:17:00

Cooks: You don't? Okay.

02-00:17:01

Wyatt: I mean, I cook a few things, but my mom is the cook in the family. And my daughter, my oldest daughter is a really good cook, too, and my wife cooks, too, yeah.

02-00:17:12

Cooks: So also, I was curious about your art show, where you sold work to go to Europe. So what kind of work was this? Were these pencil drawings?

02-00:17:28

Wyatt: They were collages, constructed like this piece right here. [points to art on the wall] We just kept that one, but they were works like this.

02-00:17:32

Cooks: Okay.

02-00:17:33

Wyatt: There was a series that I did called *Trap Series* back then.

02-00:17:36

Cooks: So we're looking at a drawing, and then there's—

02-00:17:40

Wyatt: With the slots.

02-00:17:40

Cooks: A wood frame, wood-slot framing around it.

02-00:17:42

Wyatt: Yeah, right, right.

- 02-00:17:43
Cooks: Okay, wow!
- 02-00:17:44
Wyatt: Yeah. So it was like that, and then some were just regular sketches and drawings. So it was a variety of different kind of things.
- 02-00:17:50
Cooks: And who came to the show?
- 02-00:17:52
Wyatt: Oh, a lot of people. I mean, mostly like it was like friends, family. And people we invited, and they invited people, and they bought. And it was cool, because it made it work for the trip. [laughs]
- 02-00:18:12
Cooks: Do you remember the price range, what you were selling things for?
- 02-00:18:18
Wyatt: Oh man. I mean, like \$50, \$60. And I think the top one may have been like \$150 or something like that. [laughs] Yeah.
- 02-00:18:27
Cooks: Wow.
- 02-00:18:28
Wyatt: But you've got to remember, this is like '74.
- 02-00:18:30
Cooks: Right.
- 02-00:18:31
Wyatt: So the economy was like all relative. I was complaining at UCLA when tuition—it's quarterly, you know, for the UC system—I was complaining when it went up to \$233 a quarter. [laughs] You can't even buy books for that right now. So this was, like I say, it's all relative. So the price for traveling was much cheaper. It wasn't like it is now.
- 02-00:19:00
Cooks: Sure, but that covered your trip, your airfare.
- 02-00:19:05
Wyatt: Airfare.
- 02-00:19:06
Cooks: Food.
- 02-00:19:07
Wyatt: Everything. Food.
- 02-00:19:07
Cooks: Lodging, everything.

- 02-00:19:08
Wyatt: Yeah, I mean, we didn't like eat at five-star hotels or anything.
- 02-00:19:11
Cooks: Sure.
- 02-00:19:12
Wyatt: A lot of times we just kind of grabbed some like salami—especially like when we were in Italy, we just grabbed salamis, some good meat. But the food was really good. Some places we ate at were pretty nice, yeah.
- 02-00:19:26
Cooks: I was wondering if your parents had traveled, but your dad had traveled with the singing group.
- 02-00:19:34
Wyatt: Yeah, that was later on in the seventies. They were called the Albert McNeil Singers.
- 02-00:19:39
Cooks: Okay. This is just incredible! And so your two friends, so one of them at least was an artist that you—
- 02-00:19:48
Wyatt: Yeah, Kirk. And he wound up being a writer. He does a lot of jazz reviews.
- 02-00:19:51
Cooks: Oh!
- 02-00:19:51
Wyatt: So he wound up doing that. And the other friend, Mark, he teaches at University of Utah, and he teaches, I think, economic law or something like that. He's really bright, he's really sharp.
- 02-00:20:06
Cooks: Wow.
- 02-00:20:06
Wyatt: Yeah, he's a really sharp guy.
- 02-00:20:07
Cooks: Okay, did you keep sketchbooks when you were there?
- 02-00:20:10
Wyatt: I did, yeah, I did keep sketchbooks. Well, when I was going to Otis, I kept sketchbooks mainly when I was going there. But once I graduated from high school and got into college, I didn't keep sketchbooks as much. I did a lot of photography.
- 02-00:20:31
Cooks: You did? This is the first time we're hearing about photography.

02-00:20:34

Wyatt:

Yeah, but I did it in conjunction with posing people or spaces for painting and drawing. But what happened is I wind up taking pictures. Like when I went to Europe, I got some pretty nice photographs there.

02-00:20:50

Cooks:

That's the kind of images you made while you were in Europe, with photographs.

02-00:20:55

Wyatt:

Photographs.

02-00:20:57

Cooks:

In the show that you had to go, who were your models? I have a lot of questions about your models throughout your career.

02-00:21:05

Wyatt:

Yeah. Sometimes it's as simple as just going through books, magazines, and I see an image I like and, you know, I just, if the image is white and it was a nice form, I just took that and made them black or whatever, and vice versa. [Cooks laughs] It just depended on what I wanted to do. Later on, like '73, '74, I started taking photographs of my subject matter that I wanted for my drawings and my paintings, and these are pretty much just, to this day, my family and friends. That's mainly what I use, you know? I've got some friends of mine that I did pictures that included them, their kids, in murals. And their kids are like grown kids now, yeah. [laughs]

02-00:21:58

Cooks:

That's incredible.

02-00:21:58

Wyatt:

Yeah. So a lot of the people that I use are actual people. Like that piece in the doorway, the guy holding the New Testament, his name was Mr. Smith, and he lived across the street from the Watts Towers Art Center. He was always sitting on the porch at a certain time of day, reading his Bible. So I went over there and I got some really good pictures of his hands, and so I did a drawing of it.

02-00:22:23

Cooks:

So how do people respond, if it's someone you don't really know, you ask, "Can I take a picture of you?" Are they—?

02-00:22:29

Wyatt:

Well, most of the people, [if] I take pictures of them, I know them.

02-00:22:32

Cooks:

Okay, right.

- 02-00:22:32
Wyatt: You know, like they're either family or friends. I don't just like [to photograph people] just mainly off of the street, because people's privacy. But mostly family and friends. They love it. [laughs]
- 02-00:22:48
Cooks: Wow! So you get this trip to Europe, you fund your own way, you go to all these different countries, and you're also seeing art for the first time—from books. And you're learning about editing, the way that art is kind of mediated from the original source.
- 02-00:23:18
Wyatt: Right.
- 02-00:23:18
Cooks: Like the *Haystacks [Series]*, to how you get to see it in Compton in a library.
- 02-00:23:23
Wyatt: Right.
- 02-00:23:25
Cooks: Now, but what did that mean—
- 02-00:23:26
Wyatt: Through a four-color process, when it got to books at that time, yeah.
- 02-00:23:30
Cooks: And what did that mean to you? What was your takeaway for that?
- 02-00:23:36
Wyatt: You know, in terms of my approach to art after that, my thinking about that?
- 02-00:23:40
Cooks: Did it impact the way maybe you wanted to be in more control over the way people saw your art? Or if your art was published in books, you wanted to have more control? Or—
- 02-00:23:52
Wyatt: No, not really, because there's no way you can really—you can't control it. That's like public art. Once it's out there, it's out there. People are going to interpret it and take pictures. Like for instance, if they take a picture of one of my outdoor murals, like I said, from day to day the light changes, it's going to change. So depending on how they shoot it—I've seen some photographs that are just beautiful, because the light was like perfect. And then I've seen some where it's overcast, and they're just as beautiful. You know, because you see colors that you wouldn't normally see in a real bright kind of Kodak-y day. [laughs]

02-00:24:30

Cooks: So that's interesting, I mean, to me, to think about how your art can be appreciated under different conditions, when you're seeing the difference between seeing work in a book versus seeing it in person.

02-00:24:44

Wyatt: Right.

02-00:24:45

Cooks: It's the same work of art, and yet the experience of it can be so different.

02-00:24:51

Wyatt: Along the same lines with being edited, it's like looking at some of the old statues that have been excavated from years and years—I don't want to say Baroque, but—oh, I'm trying to think of the period. But anyway, these statues, they're classics. You see them all the time in books with no arms and everything.

02-00:25:17

Cooks: Classical antiquity?

02-00:25:18

Wyatt: Yeah. And that became a school of thought. You know, if you went to art school during that period of time, you actually have students doing drawing of torsos with no head, no arms. Like I say, it became another form of art. But the whole reason why it's there is because they broke off, you know? [laughs] They broke off, either through the years or they fell or they got unearthed or something like that. Yeah, basically, they broke, because those are the most fragile parts of—that's when you look and you see fingers gone, and arms. And yet, the art world somehow made that an art form in itself at that period of time. I mean, you can look at some of the old books with drawings, and that's it, that's all they draw. But that evolved out of the fact that it just broke, it just broke. Simple as that. [laughs]

02-00:26:32

Cooks: And people find the appreciation, yeah, in what's left. Yeah.

02-00:26:36

Wyatt: Yeah, and also, too, that's all they see, so that's it.

02-00:26:42

Cooks: Right.

02-00:26:43

Wyatt: You know, somebody who's unfamiliar with art, and even people that are really familiar with art, they look at that and somehow what I get from it is that they think it's intentional. Now, there are certain images like sculptures and different works where they do a bust or something like that, and it's intentional. But the full-figure pieces, you know, they just broke off. And so that became, like I say, an art form in itself, and it became almost like a school

of thought. Because you look at a lot of drawings in a lot of drawing classes that were happening during that time, and painting, and those images show up a lot during that period of time.

02-00:27:26

Cooks: Right, and that's what you see when you go to the Louvre.

02-00:27:29

Wyatt: Yeah!

02-00:27:29

Cooks: And when you go even to the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art] even, and you see the remnants of what's left. Right.

02-00:27:36

Wyatt: Right, right. I remember when I went to the Louvre—and I'm getting ahead on what you're saying, but you mentioned the Louvre. So I went, and there was a section that we went into, which was like a student section, and I saw this huge sculpture. It was a woman holding up the Earth, the whole world, right? And she's holding it up, and I approached from the back, and then I come around to the front, and she's African. [laughs] I took a picture of it! You don't get to see that. First of all, it's a woman, and then she's a Black woman! And it's like whoa. It blew me away to see that. And this was like student work during that period of time.

02-00:28:20

Cooks: Wow.

02-00:28:20

Wyatt: So you know, art is amazing.

02-00:28:23

Cooks: Yeah, I haven't seen that.

02-00:28:29

Wyatt: There's always people doing amazing stuff in art that may not be seen by their contemporaries or even in their lifetime, but it will come to light some kind of way, yeah. And that's always beautiful. I mean, the fact that it was so powerful that they put it in that student wing, out of all the choices they put in, it's a powerful piece. It was really beautiful. I've got a slide of it, too.

02-00:28:53

Cooks: And then you see it, coming from Los Angeles.

02-00:28:56

Wyatt: Yeah, right.

02-00:28:57

Cooks: And we're talking about it now.

- 02-00:28:57
Wyatt: Right.
- 02-00:28:58
Cooks: Right.
- 02-00:28:59
Wyatt: Yeah, exactly right.
- 02-00:29:02
Cooks: So okay. You spend some time in Europe that summer. You're a student at UCLA, and at the same time you're teaching at Watts Towers Art Center?
- 02-00:29:13
Wyatt: I started teaching at Watts Towers Art Center around 1976 or so.
- 02-00:29:22
Cooks: Okay. And you graduated from UCLA in '78.
- 02-00:29:23
Wyatt: Seventy-eight.
- 02-00:29:25
Cooks: So you're a teacher and a student at the same time.
- 02-00:29:28
Wyatt: At the same time.
- 02-00:29:30
Cooks: Okay. [laughs]
- 02-00:29:32
Wyatt: But which is pretty much the life of an artist. You're a teacher and a student, you know?
- 02-00:29:36
Cooks: Yeah. I mean, in an institution, you're a teacher, and then a student at another institution in the same city, in very different neighborhoods. You know, what was the demographics like? When you were at UCLA, were you like the only Black student in some of your classes?
- 02-00:29:58
Wyatt: Yeah, pretty much. There was one other Black woman. Her name was Lisa Dumas. In fact, we would commute sometimes, you know, because she lived around Pico, kind of like around where you are, actually, her and her husband. They just got married. And a kid. And so she was going. There was another Black guy that was there. I forget his name. But that was pretty much it, you know? There was very few; maybe three or four at most. But there were a lot of Latino folks there, Asian folks, and a lot of women. And that's another thing that really kind of stood out to me, is that there always seems to be a greater number of women in these classes than men—this is during this period

of time that I was going—yet there weren't a lot of women artists that were represented during that period of time. And that was weird to me. I mean, it's something that stuck out to me.

02-00:31:09

Cooks: So they're in the classes, but then professionally working or being represented by galleries, they weren't—

02-00:31:12

Wyatt: No. No, no. Yeah, very few. I mean, like Suzanne Jackson, she just opened her own gallery. [laughs]

02-00:31:22

Cooks: I know! She is amazing.

02-00:31:24

Wyatt: Yeah. She's a good lady, too. I've known her for years, man.

02-00:31:28

Cooks: And she's still in Savannah, [Georgia], isn't she?

02-00:31:30

Wyatt: I think so.

02-00:31:31

Cooks: Okay, I'm going to look her up. So what classes did you teach, and who were your students at Watts Towers?

02-00:31:39

Wyatt: At the Watts Towers, the students were like anybody that came in that wanted to learn. Mostly kids, because their parents wanted them to have someplace to go. But they were mostly kids, you know? There was like a budget for models, so what I would do is I would hire people in the neighborhood to come and pose so they could make money. And they were interesting to draw anyway, because I couldn't use nudes, because they were kids.

02-00:32:04

Cooks: Sure.

02-00:32:04

Wyatt: And so that worked out really well.

02-00:32:05

Cooks: Wow!

02-00:32:07

Wyatt: And like I say, Willie Middlebrook was teaching photography.

02-00:32:11

Cooks: Oh wow!

- 02-00:32:13
Wyatt: Who else was there? Of course, John [Outterbridge] was the director. Troy, he had the jazz band. I think it was Troy Robinson had the jazz band there.
- 02-00:32:29
Cooks: Noah [Purifoy] was not there, but was Judson [Powell] still there?
- 02-00:32:32
Wyatt: No, Judson was still hanging out. Yeah, he would come in every once in a while, and he'd play piano.
- 02-00:32:35
Cooks: Oh!
- 02-00:32:37
Wyatt: He was an incredible piano player.
- 02-00:32:38
Cooks: I didn't know that.
- 02-00:32:39
Wyatt: Yeah. So Judson was still hanging around there. Noah, at this point in time, I think he was out in the desert, like Joshua Tree or something like that.
- 02-00:32:49
Cooks: Could you say some more about John Outterbridge and his influence on you?
- 02-00:32:53
Wyatt: Oh yeah, I could say a lot about John. Yeah, he was one of the few people who—he was very encouraging at that point in my life, and that was really important. And plus, his work was just, man, just some incredible work. He was perfect for that space in Watts, because he was the kind of person that would encourage people and always had a good thing to say about people in the community. And the community loved John. When he retired, it was like, man, you know, when he moved on, they hated to see him go. But it was genuine, you know? It wasn't done kind of to garner political favor here. No, he just did it because he was really dedicated to having a space that was inspirational, where the energy was positive. And he was a fantastic artist. And everybody knew John, you know? For a minute he was working at Norton Simon [Museum], like in the, I think the sixties or seventies, something like that, yeah.
- 02-00:34:03
Cooks: Oh!
- 02-00:34:06
Wyatt: And he knew a lot of artists, and during that period he helped them set up their shows. So John has been around a long time.
- 02-00:34:11
Cooks: Was he an art preparator or an art teacher?

- 02-00:34:14
Wyatt: You know what, he wasn't. I want to say I read it someplace similar to what you're doing now, it was like a written [transcript], like an oral account. Somebody sat down and they did it. I read it there, but you can find it.
- 02-00:34:34
Cooks: Okay. Oh, that's so interesting.
- 02-00:34:36
Wyatt: Yeah. I think the Norton Simon, he worked there for a minute, and he met a lot of the artists that were kind of like mainstream artists during that whole period. He was known by a lot of people.
- 02-00:34:51
Cooks: And when you were teaching at Watts, were you also teaching at Otis? Or was that a different—
- 02-00:34:58
Wyatt: No, no, no. That was different. Otis happened like around 1981, '82. I want to say '82. It's in my résumé on my website. That information is there.
- 02-00:35:14
Cooks: Okay, we'll get it from there.
- 02-00:35:14
Wyatt: I think it was '82 [to '83], but I can't [say] offhand, when it was in the Communication Design Department. [laughs]
- 02-00:35:22
Cooks: Okay. So before we end for today, I wanted to ask if you would say something about how you balanced going to school and teaching, and how did you support yourself financially? So just balance, in terms of time, and then supporting yourself financially to get through school. How were you able to do all of this?
- 02-00:35:49
Wyatt: Well, one thing: I was still living at home, which helped a lot.
- 02-00:35:50
Cooks: Okay.
- 02-00:35:51
Wyatt: And it was an easy ride, because my car was great on gas. It was like a 1964 Chevy Nova, and I had it since high school. [laughs] So it was easy to get around. And I didn't really require a bunch of stuff, just gas. And as long as I made enough to take care of tuition and supplies, I was good, which I did have to make money to do that.
- 02-00:36:21
Cooks: When you were—

- 02-00:36:21
Wyatt: And then plus, too, around this time the music thing was going on, too, so you know—[laughs]
- 02-00:36:28
Cooks: Oh right, that's all happening at the same time.
- 02-00:36:27
Wyatt: So it all helped to augment—
- 02-00:36:31
Tewes: So you're balancing many more things at this time.
- 02-00:36:34
Wyatt: Yeah. But you have all the energy in the world back when I was that age, too, you know? [laughs]
- 02-00:36:43
Cooks: Next session, we'll talk about this, but just to give some detail: your first song that you mentioned, "Keep on Keepin' On (Doin' What You Do)," was 1974, so that is—
- 02-00:36:56
Wyatt: No, that was 19, I want to say, '76.
- 02-00:37:01
Cooks: Oh okay.
- 02-00:37:02
Wyatt: But you know what, I can look it up, or else you can find it online. [It was released by The Miracles in 1975.]
- 02-00:37:04
Cooks: I can look it up, too.
- 02-00:37:07
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 02-00:37:06
Cooks: But that's the same time you're in college.
- 02-00:37:08
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah, the same, oh definitely. When I was in college, the royalties helped to augment—yeah.
- 02-00:37:17
Cooks: So you're teaching at Watts Towers; you're writing hit records. [laughs]
- 02-00:37:21
Wyatt: Yeah, but I wasn't teaching every day at the Towers. It was like maybe two or three times a week.

- 02-00:37:27
Cooks: Well, that's substantial. And going to school.
- 02-00:37:29
Wyatt: Yeah, and going to school. So you know, you just have to balance it out a lot. But I tried to keep my life as balanced as I could back then.
- 02-00:37:40
Cooks: Wow.
- 02-00:37:41
Wyatt: I had to make time to party, you know, and all that stuff. [laughs]
- 02-00:37:44
Cooks: And act your age. Yes, wow. Okay. So I think we're going to stop.
- 02-00:37:50
Tewes: Okay.
- 02-00:37:50
Cooks: For today.
- 02-00:37:50
Wyatt: Oh okay. Oh good.
- 02-00:37:51
Tewes: Sounds good. Before we close out, Richard, is there anything you want to wrap up in the things we've discussed all day today?
- 02-00:37:57
Wyatt: No. I mean, it's been pretty [good], because the questions are pretty concise.
- 02-00:38:03
Tewes: Great.
- 02-00:38:03
Wyatt: You know, you guys have got a good outline, we'll leave it right there.
- 02-00:38:05
Tewes: [laughs] Okay! Well, thank you for today.
- 02-00:38:07
Wyatt: Mm-hmm.

Interview 3: February 7, 2023

03-00:00:00

Tewes: This is a third interview with Richard Wyatt, Jr., for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes on February 7, 2023 in Los Angeles, California. Bridget, why don't you take it from here?

03-00:00:21

Cooks: Yes. So you know, I'm so excited to keep talking to you. Thank you for making the time for us. [laughs]

03-00:00:29

Wyatt: Oh, thank you. Thank you, guys.

03-00:00:32

Cooks: We had been talking about the mid-to-late seventies and early eighties. You were teaching at Watts Towers Art Center while you were a student at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles].

03-00:00:46

Wyatt: Right.

03-00:00:46

Cooks: And then in '82, you started teaching at Otis [Art Institute]. Was this in the Communication Arts Program?

03-00:00:55

Wyatt: Yeah, Communication Design Department.

03-00:00:57

Cooks: Communication Design, okay.

03-00:00:58

Wyatt: And the head of that department was Sheila [Levant] de Bretteville.

03-00:01:01

Cooks: Oh yes, okay. Yes, she's quite notable. Absolutely.

03-00:01:05

Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So I was there for maybe two years—I don't know, but it would be in my résumé—but I was there for at least a year.

03-00:01:15

Cooks: Okay.

03-00:01:16

Wyatt: It's another one of those classes, where I had students say thanks over the years, and so it's always nice. [laughs]

03-00:01:25

Cooks: And what was that like, having been a student at Otis in their Saturday [program]?

03-00:01:33

Wyatt: It was pretty surreal, to tell you the truth, because I was teaching there, and the guy who was there working under Charlie [White] back in the seventies, who was actually enrolled and I think working on his master's, and he walked in and he saw me teaching, and he looked like he was full [or welling up with tears], and says, "Man, this is incredible to see you—" because he's known me since I was a kid! You could tell he was full, because he saw me actually teaching there, because I was like the kid walking around, you know?

03-00:02:05

Cooks: I mean, really young.

03-00:02:06

Wyatt: I'm in fatigues, you know? [laughs]

03-00:02:10

Cooks: Wow!

03-00:02:10

Wyatt: Yeah.

03-00:02:12

Cooks: That's exciting.

03-00:02:13

Wyatt: Yeah, it was.

03-00:02:13

Cooks: And were you teaching drawing?

03-00:02:16

Wyatt: I was teaching drawing. Yes, drawing, mainly drawing. They wanted to eventually paint, so I taught them some painting, too, because I always respond to my students. Even at [University of California], Irvine, when I was teaching there later. You know, students really got into drawing, and the idea and concept of putting art in public places and really thinking about it, because we had drawing assignments where we did stuff around campus. One of the students even got her image in the student paper.

03-00:02:53

Cooks: Oh, that's great!

03-00:02:53

Wyatt: Yeah. She was pretty excited about that. Really talented young woman, too. And so eventually, the students that had me for the first quarter that I was there, they signed up for the next one. And it was nice because it was like a waiting list kind of situation for kids to get in, the ones that wanted to learn

painting. I taught painting, as well, too, and they loved that. So yeah. I think I've gone ahead. You mentioned—[laughs]

03-00:03:28

Cooks: No, that's fine.

03-00:03:30

Wyatt: Okay.

03-00:03:30

Cooks: And you were there for a couple of years, you said?

03-00:03:34

Wyatt: Yeah, what happened is that Judy Baca, who was teaching there, I think she went on sabbatical, and she recommended me to teach her class.

03-00:03:44

Cooks: At Irvine.

03-00:03:44

Wyatt: At Irvine.

03-00:03:46

Cooks: Yes, okay.

03-00:03:47

Wyatt: It was cool. I said, "Yeah, that's great!" It was a long trek, because I'm still here in LA, but I said, "Yeah, it'd be great." Because I'd taught before, and I enjoy teaching, but to tell you the truth, I really enjoy teaching students that are serious, you know? Because like I always say, I don't like to babysit. But it doesn't matter whether they're young or old, because there are young students that are really serious about doing work, even though they're young and haven't had the life experiences or whatever yet. But it's just something that you see in students at an early age. For me, I love when I'm teaching something to students—kids or adults—and they actually get what you're saying, and you can actually see a light come on in their eyes. That's like the best feeling in the world. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

03-00:04:43

Cooks: I was at UCI when you were there, so I think that was '92 to—well, I left in '93, so you might have taught a year after I left—so maybe '92 to '94. But we can check the dates.

03-00:04:59

Wyatt: Okay, yes. I think I've got it in my résumé.

03-00:05:03

Cooks: In your bio?

03-00:05:05

Wyatt: In there, yeah. [I was there from '91 to '92.]

- 03-00:05:06
Cooks: One of the things that you did was you had the students build their own painting structures, right?
- 03-00:05:14
Wyatt: Right.
- 03-00:05:15
Cooks: Would you say something about that process?
- 03-00:05:18
Wyatt: Sure. When I responded to the students that did want to learn painting, I took them from the very beginning stages on up. I said, "First of all, we're going to make it economically [accessible] for you as students as possible." We wanted to make it where you wouldn't go into—because stuff—paint is expensive, as well as canvas, when you talk about linen or whatever. I said, "First of all, for your support system, you can just use fiberglass screen," and that's the stuff that you see on screen doors and screen windows. I think it was about a twelve or fourteen mesh. And I just taught them how to make their own support. It was an alternative to canvas. And so basically we'd lay out flat plastic on the floor in the school, and then I'd have them paint using gel, clear gel, which is great, because it has two purposes. One, it adds to the priming of the surface, you know? You've got the initial primer or clear coat, and then you go on top with gesso, and you can do sanding or whatever. But once you've done that, then all you simply do is just lift it up, because it won't stick to plastic, you know? So you lift it up and you've got your support.
- 03-00:06:44
Cooks: And they made the stretcher bars and the—
- 03-00:06:48
Wyatt: No, no, you didn't use stretcher bars.
- 03-00:06:49
Cooks: Oh okay.
- 03-00:06:50
Wyatt: Yeah. I mean, I taught them how to do that eventually, but—
- 03-00:06:51
Cooks: Oh, you did?
- 03-00:06:53
Wyatt: Yeah, but you know, how to make stretcher bars: how to buy the wood for it, and how to stretch canvas.
- 03-00:06:59
Cooks: That's great.

03-00:07:01

Wyatt:

But I really wanted them to learn that there are different alternatives, in terms of materials, you know? That's part of your journey as an artist, where you use materials that nobody's ever used before, whether it's found objects or whatever. And then I also had them paint just using primary colors, you know, that was it. Primary colors, and I think about two or three brushes. One was a house brush that you can buy cheap. They were like two dollars or something like that, like an inch. House brush and a couple of good flat brushes and a good sable round. Usually sable rounds, around two or three, so they can get into detail. And that was it. That was my approach and my strategy to that. I wanted to make sure that they learned color just using primary colors, because you can use primary colors, and you can get all the colors in the rainbow. And eventually, you know, they'd go on to what I consider designer colors, [laughs] special magentas and all that stuff like that.

03-00:08:16

But I really wanted them to understand color and be open to color, and to get their heads out of the way, in terms of working and observation, which was my focus at that time. I wanted them to get their heads out of the way of what they're seeing. Because most students, when they come in and they draw, for instance, a tree or a tree leaf, they draw what they think a tree leaf looks like—as opposed to really studying what that does, what's going on with that, and thinking about the things that I mentioned before. The environment changes, it's not consistent, and all that's going to be reflected in your work. And so I had them think about it like that: it was purely observation, and that's the way that you learn color, from that standpoint, in terms of representational painting. You learn it from just really slowing down and looking. And I'd have them work on it a long period of time, and I would even have them isolate—like for instance, if they did a portrait or whatever, I'd then have them isolate a nose or an eye or whatever, and work on that for about two or three days. And then they they'd take it off, and they'd see just how much more they've seen in that. And so that was the whole thing, just to get them to think differently about their approach to painting—and drawing, to a certain extent, too.

03-00:09:42

Cooks:

I love it. I remember seeing the big surfaces, people going in and out of the studio when you were there. There was a live model.

03-00:09:54

Wyatt:

Yeah.

03-00:09:55

Cooks:

Yes, I remember that.

03-00:09:56

Wyatt:

Oh yeah.

03-00:09:57

Cooks:

And I think that wasn't very common at UCI at that time.

- 03-00:10:02
Wyatt: No, because it was heavily—they used to call up like CalArts [California Institute of the Arts], you know—
- 03-00:10:08
Cooks: Yes.
- 03-00:10:09
Wyatt: —for Irvine, which was good. I loved that about that, because I like conceptual work, and then work that's really kind of heady, as well, too. But it was an alternative to what they were getting already. And a lot of students said that just being in my class, they learned more in just one quarter, one or two quarters, than they had the whole time, in terms of working from observation in painting. So it was—
- 03-00:10:42
Cooks: Fast.
- 03-00:10:43
Wyatt: Yeah, it was a great alternative to the curriculum at Irvine, which was good, because they got really good instruction from some of the other teachers. They had Danny Martinez, who I think is still there.
- 03-00:11:00
Cooks: Danny Martinez was there.
- 03-00:11:00
Wyatt: And then there's also, oh—
- 03-00:11:04
Cooks: Pat Ward Williams was there.
- 03-00:11:04
Wyatt: Pat Ward Williams. Yeah, I know her real well.
- 03-00:11:07
Cooks: Ed Bereal had been there, but had left.
- 03-00:11:08
Wyatt: Right, right.
- 03-00:11:10
Cooks: Craig Kauffman was there.
- 03-00:11:12
Wyatt: Right. Barbara Kruger was there for a minute, because I remember—
- 03-00:11:15
Cooks: Barbara Kruger was there, yes.
- 03-00:11:17
Wyatt: Yeah, I did a graduate review with her, actually.

- 03-00:11:22
Cooks: Oh wow!
- 03-00:11:21
Wyatt: You know, looking at students' work. She was really cool. I liked her a lot.
- 03-00:11:26
Cooks: That's great. Yeah.
- 03-00:11:29
Wyatt: I remember we went into this one student's studio, and they had these real expensive brushes with paint just left on them. And I think we said, at the same time, "Well, they must not be hurting for [money]." And she said the same exact thing. They were really fine brushes, fine hair brushes, you know?
- 03-00:11:54
Cooks: Interesting.
- 03-00:11:57
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-00:11:58
Cooks: Yeah. Ulysses [Jenkins]. He may have overlapped with you, but maybe he came a little later.
- 03-00:12:03
Wyatt: I don't think he was there when I was there.
- 03-00:12:04
Cooks: Okay. And—
- 03-00:12:08
Wyatt: But I was there just for like maybe two or three quarters, maybe.
- 03-00:12:14
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-00:12:13
Wyatt: Or I think it was like maybe a couple years.
- 03-00:12:18
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-00:12:18
Wyatt: But I do know that Catherine [Lord] wanted me to continue on, but I had so many other projects going on, I just couldn't do it.
- 03-00:12:25
Cooks: Sure, yeah. Catherine Lord. When she came, that really made a difference in the direction of the Department.
- 03-00:12:31
Wyatt: Yeah, right.

- 03-00:12:32
Cooks: It became more conceptual.
- 03-00:12:33
Wyatt: Right, right, yeah.
- 03-00:12:36
Cooks: Well, that was terrific. I love hearing the nitty-gritty. And it's clear that you, in your teaching, are teaching students how to see and just get down to the work, and like you said, put aside those preconceived ideas, you know?
- 03-00:12:57
Wyatt: Exactly.
- 03-00:12:59
Cooks: It makes a huge difference.
- 03-00:13:00
Wyatt: Yeah. I mean, you have to open up, because you only know so much. And especially in terms of observation, you really learn far more in a shorter period of time, because you start thinking differently about—like I say, you're not just relying on your own imagination. Like for instance, this is what a tree looks like, or this is what African American hair looks like. You look at those things, I mean, it gets—for me, at least, I can tell—skin tones. There are no skin tones alike, even within culture. Like the Black culture, the European, Asian, there are no two skin tones alike, within each culture. [laughs] No two alike, you know? To me, that's fascinating to me. Yeah, and I like to pursue stuff like that. Yeah.
- 03-00:14:06
Cooks: Okay. So in terms of mentorship, I'm thinking about this a little differently from teaching. I mean, teaching can be a part of it, and maybe it starts as teaching, but do you think of yourself, in addition, as a mentor?
- 03-00:14:26
Wyatt: Yes! I mean, I've had plenty of opportunities to mentor people, students starting at the Watts Towers Art Center when I was teaching. When I did that mural, [*Cecil*], for the Neighborhood Pride Program, part of the program was that you worked with art students from the area. So the group that I had, the students were from Jefferson High School, which incidentally, my parents went to Jefferson High School, too, back in the day. But it was great. I had two Latinas and a couple African Americans—one male, one female. And actually, Ian White helped me on that one, too, so it was really good. And what happened is, as a result of that, not only did they learn about murals and painting, the opportunity came along, when I had just finished that mural, where a friend of mine, the photographer, [Anthony] "Tony" Barboza had called and said—
- 03-00:15:36
Cooks: Yes!

03-00:15:37

Wyatt:

"You know, Spike [Lee] is like—" he was doing a film shoot for the movie *Do the Right Thing*, and so he says that he recommended me to do this chalk drawing, you know? So I said, "Well, that would be great, if I can bring my students that I just started mentoring." So it was great. We went to the lot in Universal Studios and created this drawing, and it's like an iconic poster now, yeah.

03-00:16:01

Cooks:

Wait a minute. The drawing that's on the movie poster?

03-00:16:05

Wyatt:

Yeah, yes.

03-00:16:07

Cooks:

You're kidding me!

03-00:16:09

Wyatt:

Yeah. And what's good about that is that a lot of these students wind up doing really well. In fact, my wife and I, during that whole period of time, this one girl, Blanca—and I've used her in a couple of pictures, too—her parents were pretty strict. She wanted to go to the prom and said the only way that she can go is if I escort her there. So I said, "Well, I'll tell you what. Let's do this. I'll bring my wife, and we'll both escort you." And it was great! They had a great time. But just the beginning of this year, that student had a show, like in Chino or someplace, and she invited me to see it. And she put it proudly in her bio that she worked with me and she worked on the Spike Lee *Do the Right Thing* poster. And it was like so cool!

03-00:17:06

Cooks:

Wow, that's great!

03-00:17:07

Wyatt:

I mean, that's happened a lot. When I was working at the firehouse studio space, [Engine House No. 18 on South Hobart Blvd.], which is in the West Adams District, directly across the street from Golden State [Mutual Life Insurance Company]. And I worked on plenty of projects there. George Evans, artist and good friend, he had a class that was kind of based on the Tutor/Art Program, with the same thing with kids from all over. And I was working in the studio at the same time he had this class on Saturdays. And these kids got real, real good. And George says, "Well you know, a couple of these kids are like pretty—I'm going to have them work with you on some projects." I said, "That's great!" He says, "They're not ready yet." And so he got them ready, and they worked out great. These kids were in high school, and they worked on the Union Station project, [*City of Dreams, River of History*].

03-00:18:02

Cooks:

Really!

03-00:18:03

Wyatt:

And [they worked on] the Wilshire/Western [Station project, *People Coming, People Going*]. And eventually, one of the kids wound up going to Warner Brothers working on scenic art. But he was also real savvy in computers, and so he sort of graduated from doing scenic work to doing computerized scenic work. He was like on the ground floor in that. He and another guy, who had been there for years, kind of a generational thing, this guy was the grandson of—it was generational in terms of him being there. My student hooked up with him, and they started their own company, and they had their own lot next to NBC. They have one of the top companies in the world now, and they've done scenic stuff. They still do handmade scenic things, but they also do computerized things, as well, too. The student, his name was José Ramírez, and that's the one who started his own company. And then there was another student of mine who I mentored named Rudy Mendez, who lived right across from the fire station, so he worked on a lot of projects, as well, too. And he wound up working at Warner Brothers, too, and working with them. Ramírez was more like George, working in a company; and I was more free-spirited, and that's how Rudy is. He's now living in Florida, and he's doing stuff all over the place now. In terms of mentorship, that really—and I've had opportunities like that often, you know, kind of all the time.

03-00:19:50

Cooks:

And how gratifying!

03-00:19:52

Wyatt:

Yeah, the most recent one—I did a project in 2016 at LA High School to work with kids. It was an apprenticeship program, as well, too, and the subject was Ray Bradbury. He was an alumnus from LA High School. And so it was based on him, and it was in conjunction with a program that they had honoring his book *Fahrenheit [451]*—

03-00:20:23

Cooks:

One fifty-one.

03-00:20:25

Wyatt:

Yeah, *451*.

03-00:20:26

Cooks:

Four fifty-one, sorry.

03-00:20:28

Wyatt:

Yeah, *Fahrenheit [451]*. And so worked on that with the students and all, and it came out real great. There's a few articles on it. And the students, they really got a charge. One of the students who worked on that wound up going to Otis and graduating. Another student went to UCLA. So it was a good program. At the reception, Ray Bradbury's daughter came to the [event] and she was like just in tears.

03-00:21:04

Cooks:

It's a beautiful mural.

- 03-00:21:04
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-00:21:04
Cooks: It's very powerful, with the fire in the background.
- 03-00:21:07
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah.
- 03-00:21:08
Cooks: And the students were from LA High School?
- 03-00:21:10
Wyatt: From LA High School.
- 03-00:21:13
Cooks: Yeah, that's perfect.
- 03-00:21:13
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah. So that's the most recent mentorship, but I've had stuff through the years, a lot of stuff I can't remember.
- 03-00:21:21
Cooks: Sure.
- 03-00:21:21
Wyatt: Just showing people and looking at their work, giving them advice.
- 03-00:21:25
Cooks: Oh my goodness, wow. These are still just incredible—and we've talked a little bit, and you're still surprising me with these amazing—
- 03-00:21:36
Wyatt: Yeah. And I did a project in Palm Springs, too, and it was in the heart of the Black community in Palm Springs.
- 03-00:21:41
Cooks: Yes.
- 03-00:21:42
Wyatt: I had no idea that there was—
- 03-00:21:43
Cooks: There was!
- 03-00:21:44
Wyatt: —a Black community. [laughs]
- 03-00:21:45
Cooks: Yeah, there was one.

03-00:21:45

Wyatt:

And it's still going really strong. But it was another project where it was kind of based on that community and people that were a part of that community, you know, the whole African American community, as well as the growing numbers of Latinos, as well, too.

03-00:22:08

Cooks:

Okay.

03-00:22:08

Wyatt:

And so I had the opportunity to work on that project, and it worked out in the budget where the kids from the neighborhood can be a part of it. And it was great. They did a great job, you know? And they are really proud of it. In fact, a lot of the kids on that list now, they have families of their own now, you know? [laughs]

03-00:22:32

Cooks:

And was it on the side of a school, or a business?

03-00:22:35

Wyatt:

No, it was on a gym. It was called the Desert Highland Community Center. It's now called the James Jessie Community Center [James O. Jessie Desert Highland Unity Center], because he was the director that got things going. And it was really tragic, because every year he would go on fishing trips to take people from the community. One of the kids fell into—I forget where it was, but he fell in, and so James jumped in. He saved the kid, but he lost his own life. Yeah. And so it's pretty sad.

03-00:23:13

Cooks:

That's terrible.

03-00:23:13

Wyatt:

Yeah, that's pretty sad. But it's amazing, because the guy who's the director now, he was like a kid back then, so he remembers all that stuff, you know? And he's done a good job there, too, yeah.

03-00:23:30

Cooks:

Wow. I know there was a Black community in Palm Springs, but their community was destroyed or built over, and there was a lawsuit. But I didn't know that there was still a community there that's been relocated.

03-00:23:46

Wyatt:

Oh yeah, and I think they burned homes and all that stuff like that.

03-00:23:49

Cooks:

Yes, right.

03-00:23:52

Wyatt:

And there's a lot of just documentation on that. I think you can get the information through the website of the City of Palm Springs. Yeah, they have it all.

03-00:24:05

Cooks:

So what kind of research did you do for that? We're going to talk more about research, but I know research is such a huge part of your approach.

03-00:24:15

Wyatt:

Yeah. Well, for that particular piece, I just researched the area, the history of the area. As much as I can, I talk to people in the area. That's just as important as coming up with a concept. Because the concept of public art years ago was that an artist was commissioned to do a piece, and then all of a sudden a helicopter flies a sculpture in, and that's it! [laughs] Without any contact with community or thinking where the piece is going to go. And then there are concepts about what is public, you know? There's a lot of that stuff to think about too, yeah. The idea of public access. And so you have to think about all those things when you're trying to plan it.

03-00:25:08

Cooks:

Right, and you're thinking ahead to reception, also, because sometimes there will be a public sculpture, and people don't respond well when they see it.

03-00:25:19

Wyatt:

Yeah. Well, a lot of the public art, the way it's set up now, was kind of formulated by a lot of us in the early stages, you know? Because a lot of us would do that naturally anyway. You want to talk to the community to see what they wanted, to get some kind of feel for it, and that's always the best. I mean, you can have problems with people in the community, too. But at the end of the day, it's the work, and the fact that you really tried to accommodate everybody that's involved in that. So public art is not for everybody. You have to have a certain gene for that, I think. [laughs] I mean, the amount of time that me and May [Sun] or whatever would spend on a work—I mean, like Union Station, that was like four years, I think. The Kennedy project [*Ripple of Hope* at Robert F. Kennedy Inspiration Park] was four or five. It's a lot of time. And you have to go to a lot of meetings, and they're not always pleasant.

03-00:26:38

Cooks:

City governments and community town halls, I imagine, and people who don't know anything about art?

03-00:26:45

Wyatt:

Right.

03-00:26:46

Cooks:

Haven't thought about things that you've thought about for your whole life?

03-00:26:50

Wyatt:

Right yeah, exactly. But you still have to get input from them. Because a lot of times, you will get some of the best ideas from people who don't know anything about art. So you just have to be open to it, you know? Like I said before, yesterday, when you learn something and you may not have any use for it right away, just put it aside, because there may come a time when you need it.

03-00:27:16

Cooks: That's so true.

03-00:27:17

Wyatt: Yeah, like the old saying, "It's better to have it and not need it, than to need it and not have it," you know? [laughs]

03-00:27:25

Cooks: Yeah, okay. Well, that was all so insightful for us, you know, because, I mean, one of the things about you, through your work, is how we experience the city. And I'm thinking of Angelenos in general or just viewers of your work, we don't have that access to you or necessarily know where to find the information. People see your work, they don't know who did it. They just think it just magically happened overnight, you know? [laughs]

03-00:28:03

Wyatt: Yeah, exactly. Yeah.

03-00:28:04

Cooks: And so that's why this insight is just so helpful.

03-00:28:11

Wyatt: You know, speaking of research, I remember when May and I did that project for the Kennedy project at the [site of the] old Ambassador [Hotel], I mean, that was a tremendous amount of research, too. But it worked out really, really good, because when we had the initial presentation, Max Kennedy, who was Robert Kennedy's ninth son, was there. He saw our concept, and he stood up and just clapped, which was really cool. They made arrangements for us to do research at the JFK Library in Boston, because that's where they store Robert Kennedy's papers and photographs and whatever, and it was amazing. May spent most of the time looking at his papers, and I spent most of the time looking at the photographs. I mean, walking into this room where they have all these photographs, it's like a huge photo album, you know? And that was really great, to have that kind of access. I just remember one time, I took a lunchbreak, and I was sitting there and I was looking out over the [water], because it's near the—I forget if it's the bay or—probably, yeah.

03-00:29:23

Cooks: A harbor?

03-00:29:23

Wyatt: Yeah. It's a beautiful facility, a beautiful building. And so I'm sitting there at lunchtime, taking a break, and I'm looking out over the water and I'm just thinking like, Wow, man! As a kid from Compton, I never dreamed that I'd be doing this. [laughs] It was just amazing. It was one of those moments where I realized that I think I did a few things okay, you know? [Cooks laughs] It was really nice. And like I said, the family couldn't be more helpful. We did a little maquette, and we showed it to Max and his wife, Vicki [Strauss Kennedy]. Ethel Kennedy saw it, and she wanted it, so we just gave it to her, you know? And that was really cool. Yeah.

03-00:30:22

Cooks: Wow.

03-00:30:22

Wyatt: It's just amazing, you know? You just never, as a kid, just never thought that it would take you to—

03-00:30:30

Cooks: Right, it's just beyond your wildest dreams.

03-00:30:32

Wyatt: Yeah.

03-00:30:33

Cooks: And then you're living it.

03-00:30:33

Wyatt: Right, yeah. But I think part of the solution is, in any kind of discipline, like teaching or being a part of academia, it's just really focusing on it. I think that just comes from who we are as people from an early age, focusing on the work is the most important thing, yeah.

03-00:30:56

Cooks: Okay.

03-00:30:57

Wyatt: And staying around it. [laughs]

03-00:30:58

Cooks: You're very good at that. I mean, we had talked about how much research we did just trying to account for all the things that you've done. I mean, the pages just go on and on. You're so focused on the work, and I think so humble, too. Because again, with public art, people don't necessarily know who the person is.

03-00:31:21

Wyatt: Oh no, they—

03-00:31:21

Cooks: And that's not your focus.

03-00:31:24

Wyatt: No, it's not. [laughs]

03-00:31:28

Cooks: Okay. So I'm going to go back to our chronology. I'm thinking about some of the historical moments in Los Angeles in the seventies and eighties. One of the things that had such a huge impact on shaping the city was having Tom Bradley—

03-00:31:45

Wyatt: As mayor.

03-00:31:46

Cooks: As our mayor! Do you have any thoughts about that, the impact of him, maybe on the arts in Los Angeles and in your work?

03-00:31:56

Wyatt: Well, my first introduction to Tom Bradley was through the Watts Chalk-In, like I think I mentioned. He was the councilman then.

03-00:32:04

Cooks: Yes.

03-00:32:05

Wyatt: And he was the one that presented me with the check and the award and everything. It was like \$200, and it was really great.

03-00:32:12

Cooks: Wow!

03-00:32:12

Wyatt: Yeah, I started a bank account with it and everything.

03-00:32:16

Cooks: Oh wow!

03-00:32:15

Wyatt: So that was my first introduction and impression, in regards to Tom Bradley and how he was connected to the arts. Because a lot of mayors, you know, or public officials, are not always into art. [laughs] But Tom Bradley was. You know, he had a lot of foresight, a lot of vision. And like I said, he can meet you once and remember your name. He would never forget your name, because he had almost like a photographic memory. And so that was 1968. That was the first introduction to Tom Bradley and the idea of him being involved with the arts.

03-00:32:59

And then in '84, the Olympics came along. Now, I'm just talking about my own personal experience in terms of it. But the Olympics came along in '84, and he was a major part of that, you know, with Fitzpatrick—I think it was [Robert J.] "Bob" Fitzpatrick was the head of the Olympic Arts Festival at that time. And it was amazing, because from day one, he was really engaged in that whole process of creating this artwork in the form of murals, which was our thing. They had plays and festivals and everything going on during that whole period of time. It was amazing how it all got done. That whole program, the Olympic Murals Program, in '84, that was administered through Brockman Gallery, Alonzo Davis. And he did a really good job on that. He just knocked it out of the park.

03-00:34:02

Cooks: So—

03-00:34:03

Wyatt:

Because there was a wide variety, diversity, in terms of the artists, but they were also artists who had a history of doing murals in public places when it wasn't fashionable or popular.

03-00:34:18

Cooks:

So did Alonzo approach you to do some murals?

03-00:34:24

Wyatt:

Yes, it was Alonzo. He approached me; Kent Twitchell; Frank Romero; a guy up north, John Wehrle; Judy Baca; Glenna Avila, who was also a classmate of mine at UCLA.

03-00:34:48

Cooks:

Oh okay.

03-00:34:49

Wyatt:

And I've used her and her family in a lot of works that I've done. Let's see, who else was there? Terry Schoonhoven, who was part of the original Fine Arts Squad, which was him and Vic Henderson at the time. Do you remember that mural on Butler off Santa Monica where the freeway was broken off? It was called the *Isle of California*, and it was done before the big earthquake hit. The whole idea was, the premise and the concept of the mural was that one day LA would have—you know, there'd be beachfront property in Arizona or whatever, because the earthquake would be so dramatic—

03-00:35:36

Cooks:

Right, yeah.

03-00:35:37

Wyatt:

—and we were sitting on that San Andreas Fault. But anyway, they did a piece—it was really popular at the time—it's called the *Isle of California*, and it was done by the Fine Arts Squad. And they also did another piece in Venice Beach. It's no longer there. None of these are any longer there. I forget the street. I don't know if it's Main St. in Venice, but the street would take you directly into a mural, and it was like this huge mural, and it was an illusion of a building that you can see kind of straight to. Yeah.

03-00:36:14

Cooks:

And so the Fine Arts Squad, were they independent? Or they were associated with any of these—

03-00:36:21

Wyatt:

No, no, they were independent. Yeah, it's just like when Judy first started off. The first time I met Judy was in 1975, and she wanted me to be a part of a [project]. I couldn't at the time, because I was tied up. But then I did later work with Judy, and I was on her board for a while, too, at SPARC [Social and Public Art Resource Center]. And so yeah, Fine Arts Squad, they were independent. They just wanted to do works of art outside. And there was a lot of art in public places, in terms of murals, that was going on in East LA.

That's where Los Four—you know, Magu [Gilbert Luján] and all those guys—so you know, there was like just so much happening before it became real formalized and part of a city or state program.

03-00:37:10

Cooks:

Right. Well, it's interesting to think about that moment when it was formulated, you know, when it became more expected. Now we can see murals, and it's like, oh, that looks like Kent's work, or, that looks like your work, but to think about an effort of people with talent who decided to get together and really do things.

03-00:37:33

Wyatt:

Right, yeah. And this was the time and period when there really wasn't a bunch of public funding. It was like through donations, yeah.

03-00:37:46

Cooks:

Did the Fine Arts Squad precede SPARC? I'll look at its—

03-00:37:51

Wyatt:

Yeah, you look it up, but I think they were kind of concurrent with SPARC. But they did a lot of stuff. In fact, [the Fine Arts Squad was] invited to do a piece over in France. I think it was in Paris, and they did a piece, and they were only there for so long. But there was a piece they did of—[laughs] it was an illusion. They painted themselves like painting a mural there, but the scaffold had fallen. They were kind of like holding on to a rope and things. [laughs]

03-00:38:18

Cooks:

Oh, that's funny.

03-00:38:19

Wyatt:

It's a pretty popular piece, you know what I mean, yeah.

03-00:38:21

Cooks:

Huh. Well, I wanted to hear you talk more about the work that you did for Brockman and the Olympic Arts Festival.

03-00:38:34

Wyatt:

Sure.

03-00:38:33

Cooks:

So you made two different murals, and you were selected by the Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee to do these two murals. They don't exist anymore.

03-00:38:46

Wyatt:

No, they don't exist. No.

03-00:38:48

Cooks:

Could you describe them and maybe where they were?

- 03-00:38:50
Wyatt: Sure, it was at the Adams off-ramp on the northbound 110 Freeway, which is—no, I don't think it's any longer there, because they tore it out and everything. But it had been long deteriorated before then, and I wasn't going to go back on the freeway. [laughs]
- 03-00:39:12
Cooks: Oh okay.
- 03-00:39:12
Wyatt: No yeah, it was just too toxic.
- 03-00:39:15
Cooks: How long did it take you to do that? To be under those conditions?
- 03-00:39:19
Wyatt: I did two murals. The first one took about a couple months, and then the second one took a little bit longer. The first one was called *James*, and he was like an engineer that worked at the studio. All the subject matter for both these murals were people that worked in the studio with me. [laughs] Yeah.
- 03-00:39:39
Cooks: Your studio, for your—
- 03-00:39:41
Wyatt: No, no, no. The recording studio, I'm sorry.
- 03-00:39:42
Cooks: Oh, the recording studio!
- 03-00:39:44
Wyatt: Yeah. And it was weird, because I had to hurry up and come up with a concept, and so like I said, my models were the people that worked there. I had Freddie Perren in it.
- 03-00:39:55
Cooks: Oh! [laughs]
- 03-00:39:55
Wyatt: And I have my songwriting partner in it, Kris, Kris Young; and another guy who was like the accounting; and another woman, Tina, who was good friends with Kris Young. And let's see, who else was in there? Another guy, an engineer, Ed, was in it. So I just used, basically, people from the studio, because I had been working with them a long time to that point, and I had to really kind of get the ball rolling kind of fast, you know?
- 03-00:40:35
Cooks: Did they give you any directives for the subject?
- 03-00:40:38
Wyatt: No.

03-00:40:38

Cooks: Did it have to be around sports or Los Angeles?

03-00:40:41

Wyatt: No, they didn't. You didn't have to, but most of the artists elected to deal with the Olympic thing in it, yeah. But it wasn't a requirement or anything.

03-00:40:56

Cooks: So did you feel like it was really about—since people internationally were going to be coming to LA for the Olympics, it was about making beauty in different parts of the city?

03-00:41:08

Wyatt: Well, the initial thought was that because people would be coming along that northbound 110 Freeway, and it was like kind of an entranceway to Downtown LA, they would get this sort of outdoor gallery, yeah, for lack of a better term.

03-00:41:27

Cooks: Okay.

03-00:41:28

Wyatt: To see some of what the muralists were doing, and to kind of showcase the muralists of LA. And like I say, we did have a guy from up north, John Wehrle, who had developed his reputation, and we all knew him from up there. He was doing some pretty incredible stuff, too. So yeah.

03-00:41:51

Cooks: So you had the one mural off the 110, off the Adams off-ramp?

03-00:41:57

Wyatt: Right. That was the one *James*, and then *The Spectators* was right after that on—it wasn't an off-ramp, but it was like a retaining wall that I did.

03-00:42:07

Cooks: So that was the mural, *James and the Spectators*?

03-00:42:10

Wyatt: No. *James*, it was called *James*. That one mural was called *James*, and the other mural was called *The Spectators*.

03-00:42:19

Cooks: Two separate murals.

03-00:42:19

Wyatt: Yes.

03-00:42:20

Cooks: *James* and *The Spectators*.

03-00:42:22

Wyatt: Right, right.

03-00:42:23

Cooks: Got it. So they weren't doing anything, right? They were standing and they were looking different directions?

03-00:42:30

Wyatt: Yeah. And if you noticed real close there was a female gymnast doing a flip in the background, and it was like in this stark landscape, almost like a desert-like landscape. My thinking on that was that there were a lot of people that were kind of indifferent to the Olympics. There were some that were excited about it, and some that weren't, and they were planning on getting out of town. I mean, because there was a lot of inconvenience for a lot of people. Like in Downtown, they changed a lot of the streets to one-way streets. And come to find out, it worked out so well they kept it! [laughs]

03-00:43:06

Cooks: Interesting.

03-00:43:07

Wyatt: Yeah, and it worked! But that was the main reason why they implemented that change in the traffic. But that was the concept of the piece: it was all these people kind of standing there, kind of looking around different directions, like—

03-00:43:23

Cooks: Yes.

03-00:43:21

Wyatt: —do I really want to be here when all this is going on? Or, I'm excited about it!

03-00:43:28

Cooks: I remember seeing the mural.

03-00:43:31

Wyatt: Yeah.

03-00:43:31

Cooks: So okay, one more question on this. I remember it was one lead person that was bigger than the others, so that would be James?

03-00:43:40

Wyatt: No, that was Freddie Perren in *The Spectators*.

03-00:43:43

Cooks: Oh, that was Freddie Perren, okay.

03-00:43:44

Wyatt: Yeah, in *The Spectators*, yeah.

- 03-00:43:46
Cooks: Okay. And then the spectators are beside him, sort of behind him? Is that right?
- 03-00:43:51
Wyatt: Well no, the whole piece was called *The Spectators*.
- 03-00:43:53
Cooks: The whole piece was called *The Spectators*.
- 03-00:43:55
Wyatt: Yeah, and then it was that was the one mural. It was called *The Spectators*, and Freddie was in the foreground, and you had these other people alongside of him.
- 03-00:44:04
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-00:44:04
Wyatt: And *James* was just by himself.
- 03-00:44:07
Cooks: And were they close to each other, those two murals?
- 03-00:44:08
Wyatt: Yeah. For instance, like if this [wall] was the Adams off-ramp right here, and then about where Amanda is would be the retaining wall, and that was the wall that I painted *The Spectators* on.
- 03-00:44:24
Cooks: Okay, that makes sense to me now. I'm trying to jibe it with my memory.
- 03-00:44:29
Wyatt: Oh yeah.
- 03-00:44:31
Cooks: And because it's not there. Yeah, I just needed that description. Okay. So that's great. So yeah, thinking about Los Angeles as an outdoor gallery for this event, and it seems like now there are so many murals. Now I look at murals and I think, I wonder what Richard would think about this mural. [laughs]
- 03-00:44:58
Wyatt: Well, it's like a different generation now, you know? It's evolved a lot, because a lot of the younger generation of muralists are using graffiti concepts and everything, which is good. One student I mentioned, Rudy Mendez, he can paint real formally and everything else, but he's also real experienced in graffiti, so he merges the two forms. And so a lot of that is going on now. The younger artists who are using computers to generate their images and everything, too. You know, it's just another tool, just their generation.

03-00:45:39

Cooks: Right.

03-00:45:39

Wyatt: Yeah. I'm at the age now where I don't climb anymore. [laughs] No, I don't.

03-00:45:43

Cooks: Yeah, I could imagine, especially like you're saying in some of the places where it's so toxic.

03-00:45:51

Wyatt: No, I don't. I've done installs for the murals that are in tile. And in fact, the piece at Union Station, I did that piece when I was working on the Wilshire/Western Station, which was in tile, at the same time. They were kind of simultaneously.

03-00:46:08

Cooks: Really?

03-00:46:11

Wyatt: And it was done on—

03-00:46:12

Cooks: Aluminum!

03-00:46:13

Wyatt: Aluminum. And what happened is it was, you know, it was like twenty—I think the mural was twenty-two by seventy or something like that.

03-00:46:21

Cooks: I have the dimensions.

03-00:46:25

Wyatt: Twenty-two by seventy-eight or something like that.

03-00:46:26

Cooks: Let me just find it. I have twenty-five by eighty for *City of Dreams, River of History*.

03-00:46:31

Wyatt: Yeah, okay, yeah. But anyway, it was too tall for me to paint it directly in the studio, and the fire station [Engine House No. 18], they had really high ceilings, too. But so what I had to do was paint it sideways on panels. And so I have like the initial panel here, I paint that. I have one panel here, a panel on top of that—up to about five panels. I paint that whole section, right, of the mural. And then I take the top panel and put it to the bottom, and put four more blank ones. So that's how it got painted, it got painted sideways. And so the first time I actually saw it was when it was installed, to see it right, right up straight. [laughs] Yeah.

- 03-00:47:15
Cooks: Wow, because you painted it in your studio.
- 03-00:47:20
Wyatt: Yeah, at the studio at the firehouse.
- 03-00:47:22
Cooks: You know, I would like to know more about the firehouse. Because I didn't know about that. Was that owned by Golden State, since they were across the street?
- 03-00:47:30
Wyatt: No, no, what happened is it was run by Wendell Collins, who was like a figure who was real well known in the community. He was like a printmaker, master printmaker, and he had like these old printing presses in there. I think he paid the City something like a dollar a year or something like that, because he actually lived there in the top. It was really a nice space.
- 03-00:47:58
Cooks: But at some point, it had been an actual firehouse?
- 03-00:48:03
Wyatt: Oh yeah, it's historic. I mean, they have a plaque and everything on it, and it was a firehouse. I don't know what's happening with it now. But we all, in the community, always fought to keep him in there, because they wanted to get him out, and our community said, "No, no way." And so he said the biggest mistake he made was leaving. His daughters talked him into leaving and living with him, but they were concerned about him.
- 03-00:48:34
Cooks: His health, sure.
- 03-00:48:36
Wyatt: Yeah, because he was like in his mid-nineties or so when he passed away. I think he was real lucid and vibrant and everything. I mean, he had a girlfriend, you know? [laughs]
- 03-00:48:47
Cooks: Wow!
- 03-00:48:47
Wyatt: Yeah, he was like a ladies' man, kind of.
- 03-00:48:52
Cooks: And he was a printmaker?
- 03-00:48:53
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-00:48:54
Cooks: Do you remember his work?

03-00:48:57

Wyatt: Yeah, he did some really nice things. But he was also an activist, too, a social activist.

03-00:49:02

Cooks: Okay.

03-00:49:03

Wyatt: But the reason I mentioned him, giving the history, is because he wanted to open that space up to where artists can work, because it was just him and his printmaking and a few people. So I started working in there, and George started working in there when he had his class. He said, "Man, you guys are doing so much to make this place like really vibrant," because it was. I mean, it was a studio for me to work on large-scale things, and we could work with teenagers in the community, and with kids who wanted to learn art. It was pretty good. It was like the Tutor/Art Program in the sixties.

03-00:49:39

Cooks: That's terrific. Wow, okay. So the other thing I wanted to say, just to wrap up our discussion of the Olympic murals: I had noted that there were eleven murals by ten artists. You named many of them, and Alonzo [Davis] was one, and Roderick Sykes, and that—

03-00:50:00

Wyatt: Roderick Sykes, yeah, exactly. Yeah, right.

03-00:50:02

Cooks: Okay, all right.

03-00:50:04

Wyatt: St. Elmo Village, yeah.

03-00:50:06

Cooks: Okay, all right. Yeah, that's really exciting. And it is true, the murals that disappear, and then you don't know what happened to them. But SPARC only has so much power, right, in terms of helping to save murals or restore them.

03-00:50:29

Wyatt: Yeah, I mean, because it's an issue. The maintenance is not cheap, you know, and you have to get people to do it. A lot of times the graffiti is—you know, those guys are more dedicated than [you] to really keeping it on there. And part of the concept of why they do that, is they know that if they put it on a mural, it would be tougher to get it off. You know, if they just put it on a blank wall, you can paint over it or spray it and whatever. But there's a process getting it off on murals, even with protective coatings and everything.

03-00:51:07

Cooks: Right.

03-00:51:08

Wyatt: Yeah.

- 03-00:51:08
Cooks: Yeah, that's frustrating. Okay. I wanted to talk a bit about your relationship with galleries. I mean, this is pretty exceptional, in my mind, that you have this whole life as a public artist, but then you have these exhibitions, as well. So you have had representation with Ben Horowitz in Heritage Gallery.
- 03-00:51:36
Wyatt: Heritage Gallery.
- 03-00:51:38
Cooks: And then Joan Ankrum, which I think you mentioned yesterday, as well.
- 03-00:51:42
Wyatt: Yes, yeah. And it was called Ankrum Gallery.
- 03-00:51:44
Cooks: Okay. And [Heritage Gallery] represented Charles White for his whole career.
- 03-00:51:50
Wyatt: Yeah, Heritage Gallery, yeah. They represented Charlie his whole career [in LA]. And now, Ben did a pretty good job, because you've got to remember, this is a time when there was, you know, no people of color in the [gallery business].
- 03-00:52:06
Cooks: Right, no choices.
- 03-00:52:07
Wyatt: Right.
- 03-00:52:09
Cooks: And so would you talk to us a bit about your interest in working with galleries?
- 03-00:52:18
Wyatt: You know, I was always very interested in working with galleries, because it was an opportunity to show your work, first of all. And they showed interest in my work, as well, too. For me, it's been a positive. But it was tough, because I was so dedicated to doing public works of art. In 1978, when I got married, I had to really do work that would be a little more stable. [laughs]
- 03-00:52:52
Cooks: Sure.
- 03-00:52:52
Wyatt: And public art was far more stable than going down that [path], you know, a picture to sell through a gallery or whatever.
- 03-00:52:59
Cooks: Really?

- 03-00:53:00
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah.
- 03-00:53:02
Cooks: I don't know how many people can say that, Richard. I mean, seriously. Because I would think, for many people, it's the public art that's less stable, because they don't know when they're going to get a commission or when the project is going up.
- 03-00:53:17
Wyatt: No? I mean, it's six on one hand, half a dozen on the other. But for me—
- 03-00:53:20
Cooks: For *you*—for you, Richard Wyatt, Jr. [laughs]
- 03-00:53:23
Wyatt: Yeah. It was stable, because I had done a lot of it. I sort of established a reputation in doing it, so it was far easier for me. Because one thing I'd always count on is that I would have a couple, two or three, offers for a commission on the table. And but it got slow then, too, so I would have gallery stuff going on, too.
- 03-00:53:46
Cooks: Okay. And—
- 03-00:53:46
Wyatt: Like I said, what helped augment the income was the music. You know, that—
- 03-00:53:52
Cooks: Okay, that's what's coming up. It's fascinating, because as you know, so many artists teach, because that's the stable [income]. But you're—
- 03-00:54:01
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-00:54:01
Cooks: I mean, you know how exceptional this is, that you're—
- 03-00:54:07
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-00:54:08
Cooks: You can make a full living with a family making art.
- 03-00:54:15
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-00:54:17
Cooks: In the same city, for the most part. It's just incredible!

03-00:54:21

Wyatt:

Yeah, well you know, my wife worked, too. We're part of a different generation. For instance, I told you my mom, she was a stay-at-home mom; my dad worked. And that's how most of the families were back then, which is like mid-fifties or so. So by the time I started my family, my generation, you had to have both people working. So yeah, my wife worked, as well, too, and that helped out a lot. And I enjoy teaching, would teach when the opportunity would present itself. I really enjoyed it. And thank God it happened I just had projects kind of like back-to-back waiting. And that worked out really well for me. So it was far more lucrative to do public art. For instance, like I said, these projects could take anywhere from a couple of months to four or five years. If you get a project of four or five years, that's four or five years of income. Because of the way we would set up our contract is that we'd get paid x amount of money during the process of the different milestones in the contract.

03-00:55:37

Cooks:

Wow, yeah. You know, we think about the question of business. And this natural talent that you develop over your lifetime to be spectacular does not translate into good business sense. That's a whole other skill.

03-00:55:55

Wyatt:

Oh yeah. As I say, you know, experience is a good teacher, and you can learn from it, but it's not the best teacher. Beforehand, a lot of times, I would do stuff with no contract, and you just kind of learn as you go.

03-00:56:14

Cooks:

Right.

03-00:56:15

Wyatt:

So it was just part of the process: I have to pick what medium I'm going to work in; I have to pick the concept; and I have to make sure the contract is right.

03-00:56:27

Cooks:

Right, and take care of the business end, too.

03-00:56:28

Wyatt:

Right, right.

03-00:56:30

Cooks:

Okay, now some other exhibitions we have in the seventies and eighties. You had some work at the Municipal Art Gallery. Was that a group show or was that a show—

03-00:56:41

Wyatt:

Yeah, I've shown there quite a bit, actually. The first time I showed there was at the Charles White retrospective, because they had his show up, but they also had his students' work in the show, too. I think Kent [Twitchell] was in it, and a bunch of artists. I think David [Hammons] was in it.

03-00:57:02

Cooks: Okay.

03-00:57:03

Wyatt: It was like a bunch of his students that he had mentored across the years. And Charlie made it like that. Like even the show that he had at the County Museum, *Three Graphic Artists*.

03-00:57:18

Cooks: Yes.

03-00:57:18

Wyatt: He insisted that David Hammons and Timothy Washington be in it, in the show.

03-00:57:25

Cooks: Wow. That's really interesting, too, because there was some—I talked to some people, and read, that there was a sense that since Charles White was so much greater—just in terms of he was like the master, versus the student—that people were not totally comfortable with them all being in the same show. They thought that LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art] should be doing a show *just* on Charles White.

03-00:57:53

Wyatt: Yeah.

03-00:57:55

Cooks: But it's interesting that Charles White was saying, "I'm bringing my students with me."

03-00:57:59

Wyatt: Right. And you know, not to mention that there was a number of people that was against the show, because they felt it should have been more artists in the show. And so people actually boycotted the show, it had some people that boycotted it. And Charlie took it hard. I remember that.

03-00:58:17

Cooks: Really?

03-00:58:18

Wyatt: Yeah. Because his intention was just—which everybody knows—was just to not make it just be about him.

03-00:58:29

Cooks: Right.

03-00:58:30

Wyatt: But to look at, Okay, I'm good. I know what I've done, but look at what's coming. I mean, you know?

03-00:58:35

Cooks:

Right. Oh, it's so interesting. And this is what these mainstream museums bring on themselves, when they ignore a group of people for so long, then the floodgates open, you know? So there's a lot of impatience when it comes to like the baby step kind of exhibitions. People want the whole thing. Don't give us just a little room with three people. You *owe* us all this recognition. And eventually, *Two Centuries of Black American Art* shows up, and David Driskell comes and says, "Here's what you've been ignoring for 200 years." [laughs]

03-00:59:13

Wyatt:

Yeah.

03-00:59:14

Cooks:

Yeah, it's interesting and important that people understand why there was—

03-00:59:21

Wyatt:

Right. Also interesting, too, that you mentioned that. You know, Cecil [Ferguson] told a good story, too, when he was working there, when Charles White first brought his work to the County Museum of Art, and I think Maurice Tuchman was a curator during that time, and they looked at the work. And you know, Charlie showed the work. I think [Tuchman] talked to Cecil, and he says, "Well, he's a good illustrator." But an illustrator? But I'd say it was the time, and the focus during that time was really kind of like mainstream, contemporary artists, and they weren't ready for Charlie yet.

03-01:00:09

Cooks:

No.

03-01:00:08

Wyatt:

So you've got a lot of stuff like that going on in the background. And in fact, I told Christine [Y.] Kim that it's like amazing—I did a thing on Instagram, and she reposted it. It was with the show, the *Black American Portraits* show, and I told the story about Cecil and Claude [Booker], and how they'd be so proud to see what's happened. She [said], "Well, that's great." So she reposted the whole thing on her—

03-01:00:42

Cooks:

Good.

03-01:00:43

Wyatt:

—on her Instagram page. You know, you think about all the people that made a lot of what's going on now happen. They were kind of like the foundation and laid the groundwork for what's going on now.

03-01:00:59

Cooks:

Absolutely.

03-01:01:00

Wyatt:

Yeah, right, right.

03-01:01:02

Cooks:

So speaking of that, one of the other shows—this is a little later; I have it in 1988—but the Gallery Tanner on Pico [Blvd.], in the eighties. Now, I read about this show in an article that Samella Lewis wrote about you for *The Black Collegian*, where she did a profile on you and said that you were showing work there. So what is this—I mean, you might not know—but the history of the Gallery Tanner. It's interesting, CCH Pounder, she had a gallery in that area, as well, later.

03-01:01:47

Wyatt:

And I think that guy—and oh, his name—but the guy and the wife that runs and advises—oh, what's his name? Terrence. No, not Terrence.

03-01:01:59

Cooks:

I wonder if you—

03-01:01:59

Wyatt:

Terrell. Terrell—

03-01:02:03

Cooks:

Oh, from Band [of Vices]. Yes, Tilford.

03-01:02:05

Wyatt:

Yeah, Tilford.

03-01:02:06

Cooks:

Terrell Tilford.

03-01:02:07

Wyatt:

They also had a gallery on Pico, too.

03-01:02:08

Cooks:

That's right.

03-01:02:10

Wyatt:

Yeah. So all these. But I think they were after Samella.

03-01:02:15

Cooks:

Yes, they were.

03-01:02:17

Wyatt:

Samella Lewis—Dr. Samella Lewis, eventually—she was the one that was kind of the precursor to the Pico scene. It wasn't Gallery Tanner at that time. I think it was changed. It was called something else before. You might—

03-01:02:36

Cooks:

I'll look.

03-01:02:36

Wyatt:

I think it was the African American Museum or something like that, [Museum of African American Art]. But they eventually changed to Gallery Tanner, and

that's when I started showing there. I proposed curating a show there, and it was sponsored by *Soul* magazine.

03-01:02:57

Cooks: Okay.

03-01:02:59

Wyatt: And that show was called *Visions of a Spirit*.

03-01:03:00

Cooks: Got it. I know that that was at the Museum of African American Art. I didn't realize it had been at that location on Pico. I thought it was always at the Macy's in Crenshaw.

03-01:03:12

Wyatt: No, no, no. It was always on Pico, yeah.

03-01:03:12

Cooks: I didn't know that.

03-01:03:15

Wyatt: Yeah, it was Pico.

03-01:03:16

Cooks: Okay, great, and that was Samella's space.

03-01:03:19

Wyatt: That was Samella. Well, at some point, there was turnover to Joyce Thigpen. And I don't know if Samella changed the title to Gallery Tanner, but it eventually became the Gallery Tanner. Dr. Samella Lewis was the one who formed that whole concept and the initial intent for the space.

03-01:03:41

Cooks: So tell us: this is the first time we're hearing about you as a curator. Can you tell us your impulse to be that, what your concept was for the show?

03-01:03:51

Wyatt: Yeah. Well, what happened is after Watts Towers, working there for a while—and obviously, I had a baby; our first, oldest daughter, [Markecia], was born in '78. I was working at the Pasadena Community Art Center to provide a little more steady income.

03-01:04:09

Cooks: And you were teaching art classes?

03-01:04:09

Wyatt: No, no. This was a program where we—actually, it was part of that CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act] program, where we became an instrument that offered artists opportunities to different companies or whatever. Our whole goal was to put artists to work, kind of loosely based on WPA [Works Progress Administration]. But you know, we would go

interview the space and talk with people, and then we'd put them with artists, or artists with the company or whatever. Like I say, the intention was to get artists employed. And that was cool, that was like really cool.

03-01:04:49

Cooks: Okay. So you—

03-01:04:53

Wyatt: I had nothing to do with that, but my wife had a part-time job working—and she could bring the baby, my oldest daughter, too—at the Craft and Folk Art Museum on Wilshire [Blvd.]

03-01:05:09

Cooks: Oh okay.

03-01:05:11

Wyatt: Yeah, I think [Patrick Ela] was the head then, yeah.

03-01:05:15

Cooks: So you were teaching in Pasadena.

03-01:05:19

Wyatt: I wasn't teaching. I was a counselor or an employee of the Pasadena Community Art Center. Well, my job was to put artists with different companies.

03-01:05:37

Cooks: Okay, I misunderstood.

03-01:05:39

Wyatt: Yeah, putting them to work. No, no, I wasn't teaching.

03-01:05:42

Cooks: So you were helping—

03-01:05:44

Wyatt: Yes, yes.

03-01:05:44

Cooks: —to get them involved.

03-01:05:45

Wyatt: And I say all that to say that a good friend of mine, who was working there at the time, Jean Riggins, this guy was supposed to help her with a show, an art show she wanted to do. And it fell through, he left her holding the bag. And so she asked me and I said, "I'll take care of it." So I managed to get some walls from Cecil Ferguson, who designed them at the [Los Angeles] County Museum of Art. They would use them for portable shows that they would have in parks or whatever. So I got those, we got them installed. I knew all the artists, so I got them in there. And it was like a real success, it worked out really well. Shortly after that, then the concept for the *Soul* magazine show

came up, and so I did it. I don't really consider myself—or at that time, I didn't consider myself like a curator. It's just I wanted to see a group of artists show, all artists that I knew were great artists. So I wanted to see them show and to have their work shown.

03-01:06:55

Cooks:

So the initial show where you borrowed the walls, that was at the Pasadena Community Center?

03-01:07:03

Wyatt:

Yes.

03-01:07:03

Cooks:

And then that gave you the idea to do this exhibition at Samella's space when it was on Pico, the Museum of African American Art?

03-01:07:11

Wyatt:

Yeah, and at that time, it was called the Tanner Gallery.

03-01:07:16

Cooks:

And it was called the Tanner at the time, okay.

03-01:07:18

Wyatt:

Yeah, when I did the show there, it was called Tanner.

03-01:07:23

Cooks:

And so *Soul* magazine. So this doesn't exist anymore. Did they approach you or Samella?

03-01:07:27

Wyatt:

No, what happened is—this is another good thing, which relates to the music. Our bass player, [Kenneth Jones, Jr.], was Regina and Ken Jones's son, eldest son, and he went to Fairfax [High School] with us. He was younger, much younger than us, but he was a really good bass player. And so Regina Jones had *Soul* magazine, and her husband was Ken Jones, the newscaster, and they lived over in, I want to say—it's not Hancock Park, it's over by—oh, what do they call that, over by Wilshire and Olympic? You know, there's a group of homes over there. It's called—

03-01:08:09

Cooks:

Yes. And they're kind of gated off, some of those?

03-01:08:11

Wyatt:

Yeah. And this is before they were gated off, but there's an actual name for the community. It will come to me.

03-01:08:17

Cooks:

Is it Lafayette Park? No.

03-01:08:20

Wyatt:

I'm not sure, and I don't want to say the wrong thing.

- 03-01:08:23
Cooks: We'll think of it and put it in the transcript. That's fine.
- 03-01:08:27
Wyatt: Okay. So anyway, we would practice at the house, either at my house or at his house, or at the Fearings' house. And she knew I was an artist, too, she'd come to my shows, as a result of working with Kenny, Jr. And so eventually I said, "You know, it would be a good idea to do a show there, and so I proposed it to her. She was gung-ho. And then I proposed it to the gallery, and of course they were, too. It was a good turnout, and it was pretty successful, too. And then we did a little catalog and everything.
- 03-01:09:05
Cooks: Oh wow! And was it a gallery show with drawings and paintings?
- 03-01:09:11
Wyatt: Oh no, everything. [Sculpture, et cetera.]
- 03-01:09:12
Cooks: A mural?
- 03-01:09:13
Wyatt: [No murals.] Betye [Saar] was in the show.
- 03-01:09:15
Cooks: Oh wow!
- 03-01:09:17
Wyatt: John Outterbridge. I mean, a lot of artists who were working—
- 03-01:09:20
Cooks: Different media?
- 03-01:09:21
Wyatt: Yeah, different media, yeah.
- 03-01:09:23
Cooks: That's awesome. And so Regina Jones was the one affiliated with *Soul* magazine, and they helped to sponsor that or support that?
- 03-01:09:33
Wyatt: Yeah, right.
- 03-01:09:34
Cooks: Okay, wow!
- 03-01:09:36
Wyatt: Yeah, it was a really interesting neighborhood, because across the street from her was John McClain, and I don't know if you know who he is. Well, we call him Dude. Everybody knows him as Dude. But John McClain was the musical director for The Sylvers.

03-01:09:54

Cooks: Oh wow!

03-01:09:55

Wyatt: And so he did that, and then he later went on into the business end of [the music industry], working for companies, record companies. And he eventually landed at A&M Records, and his artist that really gave him prominence was Janet Jackson. He was the A&R [artists and repertoire] person and the executive producer for all her work that she did there. He put her together with Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis and all that. And the rest is history, you know?

03-01:10:28

Cooks: Wow.

03-01:10:29

Wyatt: But anyway, he was close to the family anyway, because he went to the same schools, and Taft High School.

03-01:10:36

Cooks: They went to Taft in the [San Fernando] Valley? [laughs]

03-01:10:38

Wyatt: Yeah. And so his mother drove him there, because they had a mortuary company or something like that. And his mother dropped him off in a hearse! [laughs]

03-01:10:48

Cooks: In a hearse?

03-01:10:49

Wyatt: Yeah. Man, he didn't want to go to that school, right? But then he saw Tito [Jackson] and Jackie [Jackson] and them hanging out, and he says, "Oh man, I didn't know you guys go here." And so they struck up a real good friendship. And then after Michael [Jackson] passed away, he and another guy are the executors to his estate now.

03-01:11:13

Cooks: Oh my goodness!

03-01:11:14

Wyatt: Executors to his estate. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

03-01:11:16

Cooks: And you went to high school with some of the Jacksons?

03-01:11:20

Wyatt: Yeah, it was weird. I just missed them, but they were there so much it seemed like they were there at the time. But they were there in '69, and I didn't get to Fairfax until '70. But at the time, Tito was madly in love with Delores Martes, with Dee Dee, who he married, and they had three boys and everything. And

so he was up there all the time. They would let him come to the school, and he would hang out with the security guard in the hallway to meet up with Dee Dee. [laughs]

03-01:11:57

Cooks: Really!

03-01:11:58

Wyatt: Yeah. But see what happened, is that in '69—Tito told me this himself, actually, he says, "Well, in '69 we—" you know, after the *Ed Sullivan Show*—they had their first appearance on *Ed Sullivan*, and they became huge, I mean, really just big, because that was the first time a lot of people got to see them outside of the Black community. And they became really, really big. So you had girls coming up to the school and guys wanting to jump on them [the Jackson 5]. And there's one story my buddy tells, who was there during that time they were there, that these guys would come to jump on them. Of course, they had a lot of friends at Fairfax, and so they jumped in. The vice principal, he went out into the hall, and the vice principal came out and grabbed Tito and Jackie and pulled them into the office and left my buddy and them out there fighting. [laughs]

03-01:12:58

Cooks: Oh my gosh!

03-01:12:59

Wyatt: So they could break it up, but they pulled them out of that, you know?

03-01:13:02

Cooks: That's crazy.

03-01:13:03

Wyatt: Yeah, there's a lot of good stories.

03-01:13:10

Cooks: *Oh.*

03-01:13:11

Wyatt: But he had this one story where, you know, because Joe [Jackson] was kind of strict. So my buddy—his name was Chris—and he would pick them up, because Jackie was into basketball, and Chris was like a star basketball player at Fairfax. And so he picked them up in a station wagon. You know, they would come out, and he would honk. And this one time, they came out and they got out, and Michael just dove into the backseat, like a kid, right? [Chris] was driving. It was, "Oh, just let him stay." So he went to Chris's house, and they were hanging out. Michael was fooling around with a tambourine, and he starts singing, right? And Chris's sister was in the back and she was like asleep or something like that. And then they left, Chris and Jackie and Tito and Michael, they left. Chris came back home, and of course his sister says, "Why were you playing that Jackson 5 music so loud?" And he just said, "No, they

were just *here*." And she was like, "What?" [laughs] [She was upset because they were there and Chris didn't wake her up!]

03-01:14:23

Cooks: Oh my gosh! That's crazy.

03-01:14:25

Wyatt: A really, really nice, nice family.

03-01:14:28

Cooks: So they were here before they really blew up. I guess maybe they were working on recordings and some things?

03-01:14:34

Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah.

03-01:14:36

Cooks: Because they were from Indiana.

03-01:14:37

Wyatt: Yeah, right.

03-01:14:38

Cooks: Okay. Amazing.

03-01:14:40

Wyatt: Yeah, and so they were here. And then in connection with that, when I started working for Freddie Perren, they had just started their stint in Vegas, the Jacksons. Well, they were still the Jackson 5 then. So we said, "Oh yeah, we're going to be in Vegas, we'd like to check it out." And so I call Freddie up, and he says, "Oh yeah, no problem." We were going to pay for tickets, right? And so we get there, and he says, "Oh, you know we're covered, so, oh yeah, come on." We thought we were going to be sitting in the rafters someplace, you know? And he escorts us, the whole family, down to like this one big table, and it was like the family: Joe and Katherine [Jackson]. And so we're sitting there, and we're like, whoa, man, this is great! And so they go through their show, and my dad noticed, "I know that guy, the security guard." This guy worked with my uncle, who was a police officer, the one I was talking about with Tom Bradley. And so we were backstage talking, and then Tito and Jermaine were over, and we were all talking. And I say, "Oh yeah, Freddie got us so and so in here," and just kind of small talk. And then Michael walks up and he starts talking. And then Joe came through, "Let's go." And they were like, [It's time to go]. Yeah, he was a task master.

03-01:16:16

But that was a good experience, because what happened during that time is that they were doing "Dancing Machine," right?

03-01:16:23

Cooks: Oh yeah!

- 03-01:16:24
Wyatt: And they pulled my sister up, and my sister could dance.
- 03-01:16:26
Cooks: What?
- 03-01:16:27
Wyatt: On the stage, right? And they were dancing, Marlon had pulled her up on the stage and they were doing "Dancing Machine." She's dancing with Marlon, and Michael was doing his thing, his spins, everything, but he was looking at my sister, [sings] "Come on baby."
- 03-01:16:41
Cooks: Oh my goodness!
- 03-01:16:41
Wyatt: So she loved it! [laughs] Yeah, everybody got a treat in the audience maybe, too.
- 03-01:16:45
Cooks: That's the most exciting thing ever!
- 03-01:16:48
Wyatt: Yeah, it was pretty—
- 03-01:16:49
Cooks: For a teenage girl? Are you kidding?
- 03-01:16:53
Wyatt: Oh yeah.
- 03-01:16:54
Cooks: I bet she tells that story every day.
- 03-01:16:55
Wyatt: Oh yeah, she talks about it. And she actually winds up working with a friend of hers, who did promotion with Tito. In fact, the last time I saw [Tito], we were all having lunch at Jerry's in Encino.
- 03-01:17:15
Cooks: Okay, yeah, the deli.
- 03-01:17:16
Wyatt: And so it was cool. It was really cool talking about Fairfax days and everything, yeah. They're really good people.
- 03-01:17:26
Cooks: Wow! And you went to school also with Lezley Saar?
- 03-01:17:32
Wyatt: Lezley Saar and Alison Saar.

- 03-01:17:34
Cooks: And Alison Saar, okay.
- 03-01:17:34
Wyatt: Yeah, Lezley was ahead of me, and Alison was one year behind me.
- 03-01:17:38
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-01:17:40
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-01:17:40
Cooks: And you had mentioned, also, your friend Kitty Bruce.
- 03-01:17:43
Wyatt: Yes, Kitty Bruce, Kitty Bruce. Kitty was in an art class with me at Fairfax, and our teacher was Jim Nastasia. He was a really good teacher, actually. So I was teasing her about her name. I say, "You're Kitty Bruce. Is there a way you're related to Lenny Bruce?" And she was quiet, "That's my father." She never would talk about it. [Cooks laughs] Eventually, when we all got older and kind of out of school, she'd talk about it. But the last time I saw her was at our [tenth] reunion.
- 03-01:18:18
Cooks: Oh great!
- 03-01:18:19
Wyatt: But really just, really a nice, nice, good person, good spirit. Really good person, yeah.
- 03-01:18:26
Cooks: Wow. Amazing. Was your sister—you're two years apart?
- 03-01:18:33
Wyatt: Yes, she's two years younger than me.
- 03-01:18:34
Cooks: Was she at Fairfax when you were there?
- 03-01:18:36
Wyatt: Yeah, she was there when I was in twelfth grade. She was in tenth grade.
- 03-01:18:41
Cooks: And did she go on to be a performer, or—
- 03-01:18:44
Wyatt: No, no. Well, in a sense she did, because she was like the school mascot.
- 03-01:18:48
Cooks: Really!

- 03-01:18:49
Wyatt: You know, for a minute. And then when she got to USC [University of Southern California], she was one of the flag girls and all that stuff like that. Yeah. So she was always more extroverted than me, yeah, oh yeah. [Cooks laughs] I had a cousin come up from Memphis, who was like a big Sylvers fan. And so they were in the studio, and so we went so he could meet them. We took pictures, and I got a picture of my sister and my cousin with them, with Foster [Sylvers].
- 03-01:19:22
Cooks: Oh wow.
- 03-01:19:22
Wyatt: Yeah. I could show that to you. I can send you a copy of that.
- 03-01:19:25
Cooks: That's awesome!
- 03-01:19:27
Wyatt: Yeah, I gave you notice. [laughs]
- 03-01:19:28
Cooks: What was the mascot at Fairfax?
- 03-01:19:30
Wyatt: It was a lion. [laughs] Fairfax Lions, you know?
- 03-01:19:37
Cooks: So many famous people have gone through: musicians, actors.
- 03-01:19:40
Wyatt: Yeah, the Red Hot Chili Peppers.
- 03-01:19:44
Cooks: The Chili Peppers went, yeah, through there.
- 03-01:19:46
Wyatt: And also, Byron Allen went to Fairfax, too.
- 03-01:19:50
Cooks: Oh, did he really?
- 03-01:19:51
Wyatt: Yeah, in fact, I saw him when they had the *Black American Portraits* and when they had the [Art + Film Gala]. Did you go to that?
- 03-01:19:56
Cooks: Yes, yes, yes.
- 03-01:19:58
Wyatt: Then the film, and when [Steven] Spielberg and all those guys were there?

- 03-01:20:02
Cooks: Yes.
- 03-01:20:01
Wyatt: They had a gala there, okay? And he was at the gala, and so I passed him, I said, "Fairfax, Class of '73." He says, "Seventy-nine is the best class." [laughs]
- 03-01:20:18
Cooks: Wow!
- 03-01:20:18
Wyatt: He's done pretty well, okay, for himself.
- 03-01:20:22
Cooks: Yes, yes.
- 03-01:20:22
Wyatt: He's like a billionaire or something like that.
- 03-01:20:23
Cooks: Yeah, this is incredible. Yeah, they had the big [gathering] at LACMA, the [Art + Film] Gala, which brings out all the stars.
- 03-01:20:30
Wyatt: Yeah, this was the one when they had the *Black American Portraits*, the Obama—
- 03-01:20:37
Cooks: The portraits were at—
- 03-01:20:37
Wyatt: Right, yeah. I think it was 2021, [the LACMA Tenth Art + Film Gala honoring Amy Sberald, Kehinde Wiley, and Steven Spielberg].
- 03-01:20:42
Cooks: Yeah, it was during COVID, for sure, yeah.
- 03-01:20:44
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah. We had to get shots.
- 03-01:20:46
Cooks: Yes.
- 03-01:20:46
Wyatt: I mean, not shots, but we had to get tests, and we had to be tested within a certain period of time. They were really on top of it. But it was great, because everybody was just glad to get out, you know?
- 03-01:20:56
Cooks: I know. It was much more uncertain then, you know? I guess we know more now, but I think we're not as scared as we were.

03-01:21:07
Wyatt: Yeah, but then there was a great party for all the artists at Lyndon and Janine [Barrois's] house. Did you go to that?

03-01:21:15
Cooks: Oh yes.

03-01:21:16
Wyatt: Did you go to that?

03-01:21:17
Cooks: No.

03-01:21:17
Wyatt: Uh-huh, yeah, that was great!

03-01:21:18
Cooks: Oh yes, actually I did! [laughs]

03-01:21:20
Wyatt: Yeah. That was great. Yeah, that was a good party.

03-01:21:22
Cooks: That was great.

03-01:21:23
Wyatt: It was real laid back. [laughs]

03-01:21:26
Cooks: Yes. And they're great collectors.

03-01:21:28
Wyatt: Oh wow, oh yeah.

03-01:21:28
Cooks: And just very down-to-earth people.

03-01:21:31
Wyatt: Oh yeah. They really are, yeah.

03-01:21:36
Cooks: There were so many people, I'm not surprised I didn't see you.

03-01:21:38
Wyatt: Oh yeah, we were there.

03-01:21:39
Cooks: There were so many people there.

03-01:21:41
Wyatt: Yeah, me and wife were there.

- 03-01:21:42
Cooks: Oh wow!
- 03-01:21:43
Wyatt: Oh, it was packed.
- 03-01:21:43
Cooks: It was packed, outside and inside the houses.
- 03-01:21:46
Wyatt: Yeah, good food. [laughs]
- 03-01:21:48
Cooks: Yes, okay. Now, let me—
- 03-01:21:49
Tewes: Let's take a break for just one second, sorry. [break in recording] All right, we are back from a break.
- 03-01:21:54
Cooks: Great. So, Richard, you had pulled up some more detailed information about a couple of things we mentioned yesterday.
- 03-01:22:02
Wyatt: Right, we had talked about Bill Tara, who was the founder of the Tutor/Art Program, along with artists, and art director of Golden State Mutual Life Insurance Company. Bill Tara actually started off as a janitor for an ad agency. You know, he worked his way up and became part of the advertising profession. What happened is, is that he got his opportunity to make a pitch to General Motors, and his whole pitch was how women bought cars according to the color, you know, [laughs] as opposed to, you know, whatever it was. The color was an important factor at that period of time. And so he takes a cigar, and he puts it out on the conference table, which got a lot of attention. And he says, by the time he finished his whole pitch, they gave him a blank check and the first Corvette to come off the assembly line. [laughs]
- 03-01:23:14
Cooks: What?
- 03-01:23:14
Wyatt: So that was a detail, that Bill Tara story. He was pretty wealthy, you know?
- 03-01:23:19
Cooks: And he was a janitor at that time.
- 03-01:23:21
Wyatt: He started off as a janitor.
- 03-01:23:24
Cooks: Wow!

- 03-01:23:26
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-01:23:25
Cooks: That sounds like a movie.
- 03-01:23:27
Wyatt: Yeah, it really does.
- 03-01:23:27
Cooks: Destined to become a movie.
- 03-01:23:30
Wyatt: Well, it's the same way for Cecil [Ferguson] and Claude [Booker].
- 03-01:23:31
Cooks: That's right.
- 03-01:23:32
Wyatt: [I know Cecil started as a janitor, but I'm not sure about Claude], and then they were responsible for a lot of major art exhibitions that happened, because they were working with the system and saw firsthand how things were put together and how they were done, you know?
- 03-01:23:44
Cooks: Wow.
- 03-01:23:46
Wyatt: The second thing I wanted to talk about was Anna Ford, my great-grandmother, the one who I talked about who tried to escape slavery two or three times, and eventually she got away. This is based on my grandmother's account, and my father filmed this on September 4, 1990, on her front porch. [reads notes] What happened is my [great-]grandmother did eventually escape, and she was sixteen years old, and she was found sitting and crying on the curb by a woman who just had compassion on her. Her name was [Dora]. And so [Dora] took her back to Kansas City with her and helped guide her until she became eighteen. At eighteen, she got married in—let me see here. Yeah, she got married to Richard Scott, and as a result of that, my grandmother was born in 1904. Yeah. So she was born. My grandmother got married in 1924, and they departed from Kansas City to move to Detroit, because my grandfather got a good job offer in Detroit. And then in 1930, my grandfather and my grandmother, Emmett and Helen Wyatt, left Detroit and arrived in LA with four kids and a hundred dollars in their pocket, and this is their history. [laughs]
- 03-01:25:31
Cooks: Wow! That's incredible.
- 03-01:25:34
Wyatt: Yeah. So I just wanted to make sure that history was right in this.

- 03-01:25:36
Cooks: Thank you. That's incredible.
- 03-01:25:37
Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- 03-01:25:41
Cooks: And it worked out.
- 03-01:25:43
Wyatt: Definitely worked out.
- 03-01:25:45
Cooks: And the family's still going strong.
- 03-01:25:44
Wyatt: Yeah, it worked out, yeah. And my father's the last.
- 03-01:25:47
Cooks: Four kids—
- 03-01:25:47
Wyatt: And my father's the last, he's the last one left, you know? Yeah, he's the baby, that's why.
- 03-01:25:53
Cooks: Okay, four kids and a hundred dollars.
- 03-01:25:56
Wyatt: Yeah, four kids and a hundred dollars, 1930.
- 03-01:26:01
Cooks: You couldn't go to a restaurant and feed four kids on a hundred dollars.
- 03-01:26:04
Wyatt: No, not now. [laughs] I think it might cover the appetizers or one round of drinks, you know?
- 03-01:26:11
Cooks: That's incredible.
- 03-01:26:12
Wyatt: Yeah, I know. Yeah, it was a different period of time.
- 03-01:26:18
Cooks: And then you hadn't realized that your great-grandmother was sixteen.
- 03-01:26:22
Wyatt: Yeah, sixteen.
- 03-01:26:22
Cooks: Yeah, so brave, so early.

03-01:26:24

Wyatt:

And I think I'm going to do a piece based on that. That was really fascinating to me, the fact that she just wanted to be free, you know? Yeah.

03-01:26:39

Cooks:

Okay. So I'm going to stay with that family theme for a moment and ask you if you would tell us how you met your wife, [Joyce Wyatt], and when you got married.

03-01:26:49

Wyatt:

Okay, the first time I met her was when we first got to UCLA. We received a scholarship, each of us independently, from the Afro-American Studies Center at UCLA. She was getting a scholarship, because she was in Letters & Science, and I was in Fine Arts, and we took a picture together, you know? And I mean, I had a girlfriend at the time and all, and she had her life. Years later, I saw her—this is like around '77 or so—I saw her at a mutual friend's wedding. She was one of the bridesmaids and I was one of the groomsmen. And so we're sitting next to each other and she says, "You know, is your name Richard?" I said, "Yeah." She said, "Did you go to UC[LA]?" I said, "Yeah." "We got a scholarship together, because I've got a picture of us at home." And I told my wife I was telling you about that. I said, "You've got to find that picture. I want to put it up on Instagram or something on our anniversary." But that's how it all started. We started dating, and like I say, the rest is history.

03-01:28:02

Cooks:

So you never were in a class together in college?

03-01:28:04

Wyatt:

No, nothing. [Cooks laughs] Yeah, because like I said, at the time, you know, I had a girlfriend.

03-01:28:11

Cooks:

Right. So it was—

03-01:28:12

Wyatt:

And she was at UCLA. [laughs]

03-01:28:16

Cooks:

Oh, your girlfriend was at UCLA, too? Oh.

03-01:28:18

Wyatt:

Yeah. And then I had a high school girlfriend go there, so I was kind of like—

03-01:28:20

Cooks:

What? Okay, Richard. You were busy.

03-01:28:22

Wyatt:

No. I mean, it wasn't like that. [laughs] It was just this is the way it was way back then.

- 03-01:28:29
Cooks: Well, so when you were at this wedding together, you had already graduated from college.
- 03-01:28:38
Wyatt: [No, I saw her at the wedding in 1977. We got married in 1978.]
- 03-01:28:40
Cooks: Unbelievable.
- 03-01:28:41
Wyatt: Yeah, it was around 1977. No, no. I graduated in '78. I met her in '77, because we got married in '78. Yeah. And then in other words, I saw her again in 1977.
- 03-01:28:54
Cooks: Okay. So you were still in school.
- 03-01:28:57
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-01:28:59
Cooks: All right. So you got married in 1978?
- 03-01:29:03
Wyatt: Nineteen seventy-eight, yeah.
- 03-01:29:05
Cooks: Okay, got it. And then you have two daughters.
- 03-01:29:08
Wyatt: Two daughters, yeah. My oldest daughter, [Markecia], she was born that same year, 1978, she was born October eighth, a day after me. I'm born October seventh. My mother's brother was born October eighth, and my mother's mother was born October eighth. Yeah.
- 03-01:29:27
Cooks: That's a lucky day.
- 03-01:29:29
Wyatt: Yeah. And then my youngest daughter, [Yolanda], she was born in 1982.
- 03-01:29:37
Cooks: Okay, not on October eighth.
- 03-01:29:39
Wyatt: No, no.
- 03-01:29:39
Cooks: On a different day. [laughs]
- 03-01:29:42
Wyatt: Yeah, no. Yeah, 1982.

03-01:29:46

Cooks: Okay. And you talk a little bit about thinking about having a steady income, because then you had a family of your own.

03-01:29:53

Wyatt: Right, right.

03-01:29:55

Cooks: So how were you able to balance all of that? Being a father to two young girls and—

03-01:30:02

Wyatt: You know, it was tough, but you don't really think about that when you're in the moment. You just do what has to be done in order to take care of them. And looking back on that, you're right, it's like, how did I do it? But I think every generation does that. They look back and say, "Wow, how did we get along when we started off?" So like I said, I had a lot of the art going, but during this period of time, too, I just began doing music. I was drawing a small salary from the music company I worked with, as well as I started getting stuff recorded.

03-01:30:38

Cooks: That's amazing. I want to talk about the music career next. It's been part of your conversation yesterday and today. It just became such a big part of your life. And so we talked about how you met Freddie Perren at church.

03-01:30:56

Wyatt: Right, and his wife.

03-01:30:57

Cooks: And he was already well known and successful, and his wife, Christine [Yarian Perren]. But your mom says, "Well, he's into music." You two start hanging out, and then—

03-01:31:11

Wyatt: Well, no. He heard me play, because they were at the house here for dinner or something. My folks had brought him over and he heard me play. I was on the organ, and he was on the piano. And you know, he says, "You ought to write."

03-01:31:26

Cooks: Fantastic.

03-01:31:26

Wyatt: Because I had a little bit of everything, and I never even thought about that. I just enjoyed playing with the guys in the band. He says, "You ought to write." I took it to heart. I say, "You know what? Yeah, if he thinks so, then I'm going to do it." Because I could always hear music, and I play by ear.

03-01:31:44

Cooks: And your previous bands were just you and your friends. Was that high school?

- 03-01:31:47
Wyatt: In high school and a little bit after, like my first year in college, too, and a little bit after.
- 03-01:31:55
Cooks: So you were just at the house, your house. He was there, you were just casually playing music.
- 03-01:32:00
Wyatt: Uh, yeah.
- 03-01:32:03
Cooks: Did you know that he was this connected?
- 03-01:32:06
Wyatt: Oh yeah, we knew. We knew who he was.
- 03-01:32:07
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-01:32:08
Wyatt: Because they had joined the church. And Freddie was real humble, he wasn't like braggadocio or anything. Basically, all my parents knew was that he worked for Motown, you know? And then when he got here and we get to know him, then we start finding out all these things about him. Jackson 5, you know? I said, "Whoa, man!"
- 03-01:32:27
Cooks: Incredible. So I have a long list of songs. I am so excited to do this part. [laughs]
- 03-01:32:35
Wyatt: All right. Yeah. Well, let's go down memory lane.
- 03-01:32:38
Cooks: I love these songs! And just preparing for this conversation with you, we've never talked to anyone who's been in the music business, as well as the visual arts, so this is just such a treat. So I have your first song around 1974—
- 03-01:33:01
Wyatt: Around 197—
- 03-01:33:03
Cooks: Six?
- 03-01:33:03
Wyatt: Seventy-five, '76, in there. [It was 1975.]
- 03-01:33:06
Cooks: Okay. So we have "Keep on Keepin' On (Doin' What You Do)" [from the *Don't Cha Love It* album], which is a ballad, really, for The Sylvers. But I thought—

- 03-01:33:13
Wyatt: No, no, no. That's for The Miracles.
- 03-01:33:15
Cooks: Got it. Yesterday you said The Miracles, and I had The Sylvers.
- 03-01:33:21
Wyatt: Yeah. The Sylvers was the second song.
- 03-01:33:23
Cooks: And this was just after Smokey Robinson left?
- 03-01:33:28
Wyatt: Right, yeah. And then the lead singer became Billy Griffin, who was really a good lead singer, too.
- 03-01:33:33
Cooks: Wow.
- 03-01:33:34
Wyatt: Yeah, he did the song, "Do It Baby," and all—
- 03-01:33:35
Cooks: Yes! And then hearing your work on the radio, working in the studio for the first time, any—
- 03-01:33:46
Wyatt: Yeah. I mean, that was really exciting, first of all, having it recorded. And I actually got to play on that. That's the first time I ever did a session. And it was like all-star, in terms of studio musicians. Well, first of all, the keyboard player, I think it was Jay Graydon, who's real known. I think he did a lot of stuff with Toto, the group. And then there was James Gadson, who's played on everybody's [album] during that period, Motown or whatever. On guitar was Bob Bowles; we called him Boogie. And he's playing guitar with Smokey now. He goes on the road with him.
- 03-01:34:28
Cooks: Oh wow!
- 03-01:34:30
Wyatt: And then I played a keyboard, a Fender Rhodes on it. And let's see, who else was there? Ernie Watts, who's a jazz musician. He played on it. Then on bass, there was this guy, like I told you, who was playing with one finger, and it was James Jamerson.
- 03-01:34:54
Cooks: Incredible.
- 03-01:34:55
Wyatt: And anything you could think of on Motown that you like, that's him on bass. That's him playing bass, yeah.

- 03-01:35:01
Cooks: Incredible.
- 03-01:35:02
Wyatt: And well, he was just an incredible musician. And what you would hear, bass lines, he would listen to what the other musicians were doing at the same [time]. That's an incredible gift. Yeah.
- 03-01:35:14
Cooks: So everyone comes to LA, and you're recording. You have mentioned the studio. I guess, where was the studio? Was it a private studio or it belonged to the company?
- 03-01:35:28
Wyatt: No, this particular studio was Crystal Sound. [It was not owned by Stevie Wonder, although he recorded there frequently. He eventually had his own studio on Western near Wilshire.]
- 03-01:35:33
Cooks: Oh, Richard, these stories!
- 03-01:35:34
Wyatt: I have a Stevie Wonder story for you, too. But anyway, so at that time, Freddie didn't have his studio. Freddie didn't get his studio until around 1977, and it was on Ventura Blvd. and—I can see clearly that street—Colfax [Ave.], around in there. And so when I first started with The Miracles and The Sylvers, we used studios that were available. Then we did this, The Sylvers, in a studio that was just north of Melrose [Ave.] and Fairfax [Ave.], and we worked with them.
- 03-01:36:12
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-01:36:12
Wyatt: But this particular studio, when I worked with The Miracles, was called Crystal Sound.
- 03-01:36:21
Cooks: Wow.
- 03-01:36:21
Wyatt: And so—
- 03-01:36:23
Cooks: Where was that?
- 03-01:36:23
Wyatt: It was right on Western [Ave.], near Hollywood. I forget. But his next studio, the one where I met him with—I had a friend of mine who worked for his company, and this friend of mine was a drummer. He played on my stuff, too, but he was a drummer for a group out of Carson and Gardena called Brian and

Thangs, which later on became the BusBoys. ["The Boys are Back in Town" was the group's major hit.]

03-01:36:57

Cooks: Excellent.

03-01:36:57

Wyatt: And so he was working at Stevie's studio and says, "Oh yeah, man, come on by." Because I kept up with him and I used him playing drums on one of my early sessions. So I went there, and so he takes me in a room, and it's like Stevie sitting there and he's listening to Amos 'n' Andy tapes. I know, it's weird!

03-01:37:18

Cooks: Really?

03-01:37:19

Wyatt: But yeah, he loved to listen to his tapes, so he's listening. And he introduced me to him, and he says, "Oh yeah, this is the artist, original artist." They called me Ric in the music business.

03-01:37:32

Cooks: Yeah, I noticed that. Ric Wyatt. I saw that online.

03-01:37:34

Wyatt: Yeah. And he says, "Oh, yeah, Ric. Pleasure to meet you. Glad you could come by," and all. He was just real, real personable. And the first time I'd ever seen him without his glasses. You know, it was weird, just seeing him without his glasses, just sitting at the—

03-01:37:58

Cooks: Interesting, because we would never know that he ever took off his glasses when he was with people he really knew well or—

03-01:38:04

Wyatt: Yeah, right, right, yeah.

03-01:38:06

Cooks: Fascinating.

03-01:38:08

Wyatt: Yeah.

03-01:38:08

Cooks: Wow, Richard!

03-01:38:10

Wyatt: So that's connected to that Crystal Sound studio, but it's the second studio. So Freddie didn't get his studio until around '76, '77. Because they knew I had a family, then I was on the songwriting, and I started getting a little salary for that, yeah.

- 03-01:38:28
Cooks: Amazing.
- 03-01:38:29
Wyatt: And which helped out with my family. And plus, they were real sympathetic to me continuing the art, because they had collected my work, too. And so I had all that going.
- 03-01:38:41
Cooks: So the people you worked with in the studio collected your art?
- 03-01:38:44
Wyatt: No, no, Freddie and Chris Perren did.
- 03-01:38:47
Cooks: Freddie and Chris. Of course they did.
- 03-01:38:48
Wyatt: And so that's how it worked out. Well, before they got the studio, that's when I did the thing with The Sylvers, before the studio. That was around, like I say, '75, '76, around in there. And that was called "Storybook Girl," and it was a song for Foster, because Freddie was looking for a song for Foster. It actually sounds like a song that Michael Jackson could have done when he was younger. It had that sound.
- 03-01:39:19
Cooks: But what does this mean, it was a song for Foster?
- 03-01:39:22
Wyatt: For Foster Sylvers, the youngest one.
- 03-01:39:25
Cooks: For Foster Sylvers, okay.
- 03-01:39:29
Wyatt: You remember that song, [sings] "It's just a misdemeanor. You've got to get her over it."
- 03-01:39:32
Cooks: Yes!
- 03-01:39:33
Wyatt: That was Foster and his two younger sisters close to his age, Angie and Pat Sylvers, yeah.
- 03-01:39:41
Cooks: That's the song you wrote?
- 03-01:39:42
Wyatt: No, no, I didn't write that. That's kind of signature Foster at that age.

- 03-01:39:46
Cooks: I see.
- 03-01:39:46
Wyatt: He was a kid, yeah.
- 03-01:39:48
Cooks: Okay, got it.
- 03-01:39:49
Wyatt: No, the song I wrote was called "Storybook Girl," and the lyrics were written by Chris Perren. I've had so many people, once they find out, "Oh man, I remember, I bought that album and so and so, and that was like my favorite song!"
- 03-01:40:02
Cooks: Richard, listen, it's a real thing! [laughs]
- 03-01:40:06
Wyatt: Yes.
- 03-01:40:06
Cooks: It's a real thing. I can say the same thing.
- 03-01:40:09
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-01:40:11
Cooks: Oh okay.
- 03-01:40:11
Wyatt: Yeah. I mean, they really like tore that song up, because The Sylvers could—their harmony is like none other. To me, like all the best harmony groups were families. And the same thing with Tavares, when I worked with them. They just had a sound that it was so professional, but they would really hone in. It was just the parts and the blend. The Sylvers had a really warm, warm sound. And so that was it. That song was for him, and it did really well. It was never a single or anything, but everybody just knows that song.
- 03-01:40:52
Cooks: Remembers that song.
- 03-01:40:53
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-01:40:54
Cooks: So tell us what it's like to hear your music on the radio. That—
- 03-01:40:58
Wyatt: Well, the first time I heard it was when I did "Keep on Keepin' On." The Miracles, right? And it was like early in the morning, and my sister would wake up with the radio on. All of sudden she went, "Ricky, Ricky—" they

called me Ricky, everybody in the family—"your song is on the radio." I said, "What?" "Your song—" well, then we all turned it up, and it was like, Wow! It was great. Because that's the first time ever hearing it on—you know, it's like this radio I've been listening to my whole life is playing a song that I wrote. I mean, that was just a treat.

03-01:41:33

Cooks: Surreal.

03-01:41:35

Wyatt: No, you never forget that moment.

03-01:41:39

Cooks: Incredible. Okay, I've got a whole list here.

03-01:41:43

Wyatt: Okay.

03-01:41:44

Cooks: And please let me know what I've left out.

03-01:41:45

Wyatt: Okay.

03-01:41:47

Cooks: So "Keep on Keepin' On." We have "Storybook Girl." And you're doing the music and conceiving of all the parts of the instruments, and then other people, Leon Sylvers, is doing the lyrics?

03-01:42:02

Wyatt: No, no, no. Well, when Leon Sylvers started off, he was like the mastermind behind The Sylvers.

03-01:42:10

Cooks: Okay.

03-01:42:11

Wyatt: He wrote the story—

03-01:42:12

Cooks: Right!

03-01:42:12

Wyatt: And he's written some beautiful [songs]. Remember that song, [sings] "Wish that I could talk to you, baby, so that I can let you know—"

03-01:42:21

Cooks: Yes!

03-01:42:22

Wyatt: Yeah, he wrote that. He went to Hamilton High School, he wrote it, and a teacher says, "Well, you've got to pay attention, Mr. Sylvers," so and so. He

says, "Well, just give me detention." Because he had the song, and thank God he did. He just went and just finished it up in detention, and it was like a major, major record for them. [laughs]

03-01:42:48

Cooks: So he—

03-01:42:49

Wyatt: He was really doing it. We worked with him on that album, the *Showcase* album. He did half the album, and Freddie did half of it. When they performed on our stuff, he didn't have anything to do with it. It was like Freddie's arrangements and songs.

03-01:43:02

Cooks: He's more like a producer and a songwriter?

03-01:43:06

Wyatt: Who is that, Leon?

03-01:43:07

Cooks: Yes, Leon. Yes, okay.

03-01:43:09

Wyatt: Oh yeah, Leon is a musician. He has a signature bass sound. I can tell when he's playing bass, likes James Jamerson. You can tell, if you're into music, you listen a lot. He had a signature bass sound. He had a signature way of writing, his arrangements were a certain way, and his production was impeccable.

03-01:43:22

Cooks: And he's still working.

03-01:43:32

Wyatt: Yeah. Once he left The Sylvers, he worked for SOLAR Records, and he eventually wrote for—Shalamar, I think, was his first—"Take That To the Bank." But all that stuff on Shalamar, that's Leon Sylvers. I mean, like "This Is for the Lover in You" and "Make That Move" or "The Second Time Around."

03-01:43:58

Cooks: That's all Leon.

03-01:44:01

Wyatt: "A Night to Remember," [sings] "Make this a night to remember." Yeah, that's Leon.

03-01:44:04

Cooks: These songs are in our DNA.

03-01:44:05

Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah. Leon is incredible. He's written for [New Kids on the Block], I mean, he's written for everybody. The Whispers.

- 03-01:44:13
Cooks: Really, oh!
- 03-01:44:16
Wyatt: [sings] "And the Beat Goes On."
- 03-01:44:18
Cooks: Okay. And but Freddie is writing lyrics for your—
- 03-01:44:25
Wyatt: Yeah. Freddie *can* write lyrics, but he's teamed up with lyricists his whole life, because he wants to get the best lyricists for his music. He concentrates on the music. And if you remember Keni St. Lewis—
- 03-01:44:45
Cooks: Okay, wow.
- 03-01:44:47
Wyatt: And he did a lot of stuff with The Sylvers and Tavares and everybody, and also Dino Fekaris—I mean, I'm sorry, Dino Fekaris, who did "Reunited" and "I Will Survive."
- 03-01:45:02
Cooks: And Christine writes?
- 03-01:45:03
Wyatt: Yeah, Christine wrote. She was at Motown at the same time. She didn't actually have a contract, but she worked with Freddie on stuff, and eventually they started working together. She wrote, "Give Love on Christmas Day." You know, [sings] "Why don't you give love on Christmas Day." Everybody's done it now. Even New Edition did it, you know? And she also wrote "It's So Hard to Say Goodbye to Yesterday" for that movie, *Cooley High*.
- 03-01:45:36
Cooks: And that's another classic.
- 03-01:45:37
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah. That's really a classic. What's his name, Michael Schulz, was the director for that. He was incredible. And the actor, Lawrence Hilton-Jacobs, Larry, he's a good friend of mine. He's actually a really good musician, too. He's actually played on some of my stuff. Yeah, he's a hilarious guy.
- 03-01:45:56
Cooks: Really!
- 03-01:45:58
Wyatt: Yeah, he's just really, really, really down to earth, you know? He's not into the Hollywood stuff. He's really great.

- 03-01:46:06
Cooks: So you are surrounded with—and friends with—these incredible people in the music industry and R&B/pop music. But we just had this whole conversation about the same situation for you as an artist, as a visual artist.
- 03-01:46:23
Wyatt: Right.
- 03-01:46:25
Cooks: This is just a double blessing.
- 03-01:46:27
Wyatt: But to me, it's like an extension of what I do in the visual arts. It's just another medium to me. It feels like it's all the same, coming from the same place creatively, you know? [laughs]
- 03-01:46:42
Cooks: Okay. I'm going to get to this list, but everything you're saying is just so helpful and just incredible. So you're focusing on the music, the melodies and the arrangements, and not the lyrics.
- 03-01:46:57
Wyatt: Right.
- 03-01:46:57
Cooks: Other people are doing those things.
- 03-01:46:58
Wyatt: Right. My main songwriter was Kris Young, who I met way back in the day when I was finishing up at UCLA, and I worked for this center called NACBE, National Asian Center for Bilingual Education.
- 03-01:47:14
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-01:47:15
Wyatt: And what I did there was illustrate books that he had written. And they would translate them into Tagalog, Mandarin, Japanese, all—that's what it was called, and I did these illustrations. And so we became really good friends. I say, "Man, you ought to write lyrics." Kind of the same way that Freddie told me. And it was pretty good, and Freddie liked it, and they hired him, too. So it worked out really, really well. And so he was the main lyricist for me. But the other lyricist was Chris, Freddie's wife, Christine Perren. She can write some beautiful lyrics.
- 03-01:47:56
Cooks: Really! Just beautiful, classic.
- 03-01:47:58
Wyatt: Oh yeah. I mean, memorable that it wasn't one-hit wonder stuff, you know? [laughs]

- 03-01:48:06
Cooks: Right, and okay. You just dropped a bomb on us with this illustrating books. Now, these were books to help people who were learning English?
- 03-01:48:17
Wyatt: Well yeah, exactly, like I said, it was called the National Asian Center for Bilingual Education, and the books were translated into a variety of different languages in the Asian community, and also in English, you know?
- 03-01:48:29
Cooks: I would love to see [those illustrations.] Do you have any of those? We have to try to find them.
- 03-01:48:35
Wyatt: You know what, I can't find them, but my buddy would. Kris would have them.
- 03-01:48:40
Cooks: Just fascinating.
- 03-01:48:41
Wyatt: Yeah. He would have them. If he could find them.
- 03-01:48:44
Cooks: Okay, "Red Hot Lover," that was a disco—
- 03-01:48:48
Wyatt: Yeah, Peaches & Herb.
- 03-01:48:48
Cooks: —R&B song.
- 03-01:48:50
Wyatt: Yeah, it was right at the edge when disco was kind of its way out, and this is like a little bit—it was funkier, because I was into funk here.
- 03-01:49:06
Cooks: And yeah, and I have disco-funky for "Dream Come True."
- 03-01:49:10
Wyatt: Yeah. And I'd rather say instead of disco, it was more of a dance tune. But it had that eighties kind of a new wave influence on it, for the eighties, you know?
- 03-01:49:28
Cooks: Okay, yeah. And so working with Peaches & Herb, any thought about—
- 03-01:49:36
Wyatt: Yeah, great to work with Linda. Linda Greene was the name for Peaches, you know? Just really good people. Herb [Fame], man, he is like one of the funniest guys, and just pure, just raw, just—[laughs]

03-01:49:52

Cooks: Really!

03-01:49:52

Wyatt: And yeah, you've got to kind of like censor him quite a lot, but he's good people. And a hell of a voice.

03-01:49:59

Cooks: Yes.

03-01:50:01

Wyatt: But they were really nice to work with, really cool.

03-01:50:04

Cooks: And they had a long career, because they were singing before the dance music kind of peaked.

03-01:50:10

Wyatt: Well, there were different iterations of Peaches.

03-01:50:15

Cooks: Oh!

03-01:50:15

Wyatt: Yeah, the first original one was the one that you heard, like in the older [music], like the sixties. And then Freddie got them back, contacted Herb, because they were friends from before, and says, "You know, we ought to do Peaches & Herb, do it again." And Herb, his voice is still great, and he says, "Yeah, I've got a new Peaches," which is Linda Greene. And so it worked out really well. You know, they did—

03-01:50:44

Cooks: Wow!

03-01:50:47

Wyatt: And it was like right at the end. It was kind of in between the newer contemporary music, as opposed to disco. Because Freddie was more into disco, but he was just associated with a lot of it, the music that he did during that period.

03-01:51:03

Cooks: Oh, interesting.

03-01:51:05

Wyatt: Yeah. He wrote some beautiful [music].

03-01:51:06

Cooks: So we think, as the public who are not in the business, that Peaches & Herb are a couple. But are they a couple?

03-01:51:14

Wyatt: Oh no, no, they weren't married. No, no, no, they weren't married.

- 03-01:51:18
Cooks: I thought—
- 03-01:51:19
Wyatt: No. She was married, and Herb had a wife, too.
- 03-01:51:21
Cooks: Richard, I bet you 99 percent of people—
- 03-01:51:25
Wyatt: Oh yeah, people probably do, yeah.
- 03-01:51:26
Cooks: —assume that they're a couple.
- 03-01:51:29
Wyatt: No, no, they weren't married. It was business, you know?
- 03-01:51:30
Cooks: It was business.
- 03-01:51:31
Wyatt: And they put on a good show, yeah.
- 03-01:51:32
Cooks: A very convincing show. Some of those performances are super sexy.
- 03-01:51:38
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah!
- 03-01:51:39
Cooks: Ooh!
- 03-01:51:39
Wyatt: Yeah. [laughs]
- 03-01:51:40
Cooks: Okay, all right. Now, songs for New Edition around 1986. This is "A Little Bit of Love."
- 03-01:51:50
Wyatt: Right. But then, in between there was Johnny Gill, and then after them was Tavares.
- 03-01:52:01
Cooks: What—
- 03-01:52:01
Wyatt: We worked on Johnny Gill's first album, and he was like about fifteen or so, and his voice is like—
- 03-01:52:06
Cooks: Incredible.

03-01:52:09

Wyatt: But then, it was tough to really come up with something that would make him sound younger, because his voice was so mature. And so eventually that happened. And then—

03-01:52:22

Cooks: What song was that?

03-01:52:23

Wyatt: It was like a whole album. I did a song called "Show Her Love," which Kris Young did the lyrics to, and "I'm Sorry." Kris Young did the lyrics to that, too. And then there was another song called "Half Steppin'" that another songwriting friend of mine, Larry McIntosh, did. So yeah, basically those songs. But the album didn't do that well, because of that whole thing about really finding the right—

03-01:52:56

Cooks: Right.

03-01:52:57

Wyatt: Yeah.

03-01:52:57

Cooks: Now he had been—

03-01:52:58

Wyatt: It wasn't all Johnny's fault. Johnny performed excellently. Johnny, he's brilliant.

03-01:53:02

Cooks: Okay. And am I remembering correctly that he was part of New Edition, then he went solo?

03-01:53:07

Wyatt: No, no. What happened is, is that in between that time we worked with him, and prior to working with New Edition, Bobby [Brown] had left the group.

03-01:53:15

Cooks: Got it.

03-01:53:17

Wyatt: Because we were working in the studio, and Johnny came by and said, man, I don't know if it was just that, "New Edition just offered me to join them, so what should I do?" And so Freddie said, "Look man, you know, it's like, do it, because you could do a solo thing or whatever afterwards." And you know, and it happened. All that stuff happened. Freddie was pretty sharp. He really had a lot of foresight. And so what happened is he did join, but he joined them right when they started working with Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis. But before that happened, when we got New Edition, it was right before Johnny joined. It was right when Bobby had left, and so it was just the four guys.

- 03-01:54:14
Cooks: I see.
- 03-01:54:14
Wyatt: Ralph [Tresvant], Mike [Bivins], Ronny [DeVoe], and Ricky [Bell].
- 03-01:54:17
Cooks: Yeah.
- 03-01:54:19
Wyatt: It was just the four guys, and so we did the album basically with them, you know? Although they had Bobby still on the cover and on all of the—
- 03-01:54:27
Cooks: Interesting.
- 03-01:54:29
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-01:54:29
Cooks: And that song was—
- 03-01:54:30
Wyatt: And Bobby is really a good guy, too, really. I mean, he's had his challenges, but heartwise, he's a good guy. Yeah, they all are.
- 03-01:54:40
Cooks: That's good to know.
- 03-01:54:42
Wyatt: Yeah, they all are.
- 03-01:54:44
Cooks: And your song was "A Little Bit of Love."
- 03-01:54:47
Wyatt: "A Little Bit of Love."
- 03-01:54:47
Cooks: That's another classic!
- 03-01:54:49
Wyatt: Yeah. And that was lyrics by Chris Perren, Christine Perren.
- 03-01:54:55
Cooks: Okay, got it.
- 03-01:54:55
Wyatt: And that song did really well. That's like my first song to get way up there.
- 03-01:55:00
Cooks: On the charts?

- 03-01:55:03
Wyatt: On the charts. Because I remember distinctly, too, I thought I was going to go to number one the next week, and I got overjumped by Prince, "Kiss."
[laughs]
- 03-01:55:14
Cooks: *Oh!* Wow.
- 03-01:55:16
Wyatt: Yeah. So it's like, if I'm going to lose, I might as well lose to Prince, you know?
- 03-01:55:20
Cooks: What an incredible moment.
- 03-01:55:23
Wyatt: Yeah. But I want to backtrack just a little bit.
- 03-01:55:26
Cooks: Yes.
- 03-01:55:26
Wyatt: Right before working with New Edition, I did my first production, arrangement, and songwriting with Tavares. That was like my, you know, my initiation into being a full-fledged writer/producer, and it was on a Tavares album called—I think it was called *New Directions*. And the song that I wrote—which Kris Young wrote all the lyrics to all my songs—was "Got to Find My Way Back to You."
- 03-01:55:57
Cooks: Got it.
- 03-01:55:58
Wyatt: And then there was "Maybe We'll Fall in Love Again."
- 03-01:56:03
Cooks: On the same album?
- 03-01:56:04
Wyatt: On the same album. And then there was another one: "Don't Play So Hard to Get." That we did on [the second Tavares album *Words and Music*].
- 03-01:56:11
Cooks: On the same album?
- 03-01:56:12
Wyatt: [No, "Don't Play So Hard to Get" was on the second album.]
- 03-01:56:12
Cooks: Wow!

03-01:56:14

Wyatt:

And on the second album, I did three songs, too, on the second album with them. But that was like my coming-out party, because that song did really, really well, "Got to Find My Way Back to You." And they performed it all over, *Soul Train* and all over the place.

03-01:56:31

Cooks:

Wow!

03-01:56:32

Wyatt:

Yeah. And that was right before we started working with New Edition, and then New Edition was that group.

03-01:56:39

Cooks:

Okay. And I have New Edition as '86. And the Tavares, the first album was '83, and I'll have to see when was the second album.

03-01:56:48

Wyatt:

No, no. Well, if you've got the numbers there, it's probably right. I wanted to say '82 for the first album with Tavares, and then the second was like '83, I think.

03-01:57:01

Cooks:

Oh, they were one year after, okay.

03-01:57:04

Wyatt:

Yes. And what was really interesting is that they heard my stuff and imagined they wanted to do it. But what was really interesting is that their managers, Freddy DeMann and Ron Weisner, they managed Madonna and they also managed Michael Jackson when he went solo. And I remember when Freddy DeMann, who was the guy I talked to most of the time, he came in, and he says, "Ric, I want you to listen to this album, man." And it was Michael Jackson's *Thriller*, right? And so while I'm sitting there listening, and it's like we just stopped and said, "Man, whatever *Off the Wall* did, this is going to top it!" It was like just incredible. Yeah. And of course, it made history, yeah. [laughs]

03-01:57:57

Cooks:

Yeah, the shock value when that came, it was just a new sound, and it came with dance moves and it came with the whole—

03-01:58:07

Wyatt:

Well, Michael had finally reached who he was, finally broke through, because he had all this inside of him.

03-01:58:13

Cooks:

Right.

03-01:58:14

Wyatt:

He had his opportunity to really show who—

- 03-01:58:18
Cooks: Shine.
- 03-01:58:19
Wyatt: Yeah, show who he was about, musically and everything.
- 03-01:58:21
Cooks: I remember hearing Vincent Price's voice on it, and I'm like, Wow! Nobody had done this before. What is this?
- 03-01:58:29
Wyatt: Yeah! And you know, that same year, Lionel Richie came out with his album, which is a fantastic album. Any other year, he would have won multiple Grammys for it. But his album came out the same year as *Thriller*, and *Thriller* walked away with everything. I think Michael's album sold—at that time, it was like \$30 million or something like that—and Lionel Richie's sold \$10 [million]. So if Lionel Ritchie had been a year before or a year later, he would have like just cleaned house in the—
- 03-01:58:59
Cooks: Wiped it out.
- 03-01:58:59
Wyatt: Yeah, in the Grammys. But it just shows you how forceful that album was, you know, in that time.
- 03-01:59:03
Cooks: Unbelievable.
- 03-01:59:04
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-01:59:05
Cooks: Was that Lionel's album with "Hello" on it?
- 03-01:59:08
Wyatt: [Yes!]
- 03-01:59:10
Cooks: Yeah, okay.
- 03-01:59:11
Wyatt: Yeah, I think that one—yeah.
- 03-01:59:12
Cooks: That was a big hit, yeah.
- 03-01:59:13
Wyatt: Yeah, "All Night Long." Yeah, that one.
- 03-01:59:14
Cooks: And "All Night Long," right.

- 03-01:59:16
Wyatt: Yeah, right.
- 03-01:59:17
Cooks: Okay. So we're going to talk about the music, and then—
- 03-01:59:24
Wyatt: I'm good. I mean, I'm not like starving or anything.
- 03-01:59:26
Cooks: Okay, all right.
- 03-01:59:26
Wyatt: So whatever you guys want to do. Whenever you guys want to take a break, I'm good.
- 03-01:59:32
Cooks: Well, there was another moment in 1986 I have: "Once in a Lifetime Groove."
- 03-01:59:39
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-01:59:39
Cooks: Now, come on. That really is one of my favorite songs.
- 03-01:59:42
Wyatt: It was amazing. I went to work one day, and Freddie was working on this groove that was like, I said, "Man, what is that, man?" He says, "Yeah, I'm just working on it." I sung the melody over what he had, and also wrote the verses [with the dummy melody on the verses, and Chris Perren came with the actual lyrics]. [sings] "I see you standing there so lost and all alone—" all that stuff I did. But the groove was just like so tight. And they loved it, the manager, and they used it for that movie, *Running Scared*. You know, that's what it was for.
- 03-02:00:23
Cooks: Gregory Hines.
- 03-02:00:24
Wyatt: Gregory Hines.
- 03-02:00:24
Cooks: Billy Crystal. It was a great movie.
- 03-02:00:27
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-02:00:28
Cooks: Whoo!

03-02:00:30

Wyatt:

And yeah, I remember we went to—oh man, this brings back a lot of memories. [laughs] When we worked on that, we worked on it first in Nashville, because we had to catch New Edition in between concerts and rehearsing, because they were like—you have to be a kid to keep up with that schedule. If they weren't in the studio, they were rehearsing for concerts. And if they weren't doing that, they were doing shows, like TV shows. It's pretty hectic. I don't know how they did it as kids. You know, like I said, we went to Nashville first, and then we finish it up in New Orleans.

03-02:01:18

And it just so happens that in New Orleans, during that same week that I was going to be there, I was talking to Bill Pajaud, and he says, "Yeah, man, I'm going to be doing this workshop with John Scott in New Orleans," who was the head of Xavier's [Xavier University of Louisiana] Art Program. And he's a fantastic artist, a genius award winner and everything else, you know? He was incredible. And so at this session was Bill Pajaud, John Biggers, and—oh man, I forget the other people there. And I took pictures and everything there of it, too. And so working with John, once we finished recording, I would hang out with him at the college. And John said, "Man, you know my daughters, they love New Edition. Is there any way you can—" because they tried to get tickets and it was sold out and all that stuff. I said, "Oh no, I'll take care of it." And so they dropped them off there and everything, and they went to the concert and had great seats and everything. And then we brought them back and we brought them back in the limo and everything, and they liked that!

03-02:02:36

Cooks:

Wow!

03-02:02:36

Wyatt:

I mean, you know, it was like a dream for them.

03-02:02:37

Cooks:

Dad of the year! [laughs]

03-02:02:39

Wyatt:

Yeah, yeah, yeah. And so you know, so they went to meet them, "Oh yeah, we'll take you." The place where they stayed was just packed [with fans in the lobby]. So I went upstairs, and I talked to [Jeff, one of their bodyguards, and Jeff] went with me, yeah, to Ralph and to Bobby, who was there at that time, too. They were still close, but Bobby was working on his own album, which did quite well. I think Ralph came down, met with us and everything, took pictures and the whole thing.

03-02:03:13

Cooks:

With your daughters?

03-02:03:15

Wyatt:

No, no, no. That was with the—

- 03-02:03:19
Cooks: The folks who were at the show?
- 03-02:03:19
Wyatt: John Scott's daughters, John Scott's daughters.
- 03-02:03:22
Cooks: Oh, with John Scott's daughters.
- 03-02:03:23
Wyatt: Yeah, this is in New Orleans.
- 03-02:03:25
Cooks: Yes, sorry.
- 03-02:03:25
Wyatt: Yeah. So his daughters were the ones that wanted to go.
- 03-02:03:27
Cooks: Everyone has daughters. Right, okay.
- 03-02:03:29
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-02:03:29
Cooks: Okay. So Ralph came down and took pictures with John Scott's daughters and made this—
- 03-02:03:34
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah.
- 03-02:03:35
Cooks: I'm sure they just melted.
- 03-02:03:37
Wyatt: Yeah. And they wrote me thank you notes and everything. [laughs] Oh yeah, so it was great. It was great to do that, because John was a really good person, a fantastic artist—father and family [man].
- 03-02:03:51
Cooks: Wow.
- 03-02:03:51
Wyatt: He was a good guy.
- 03-02:03:53
Cooks: That's a great story.
- 03-02:03:55
Wyatt: Yeah. That's connected with "Once in a Lifetime Groove," that was an experience I had. [laughs]

- 03-02:04:03
Cooks: Incredible.
- 03-02:04:05
Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- 03-02:04:06
Cooks: And so could you say anything about going to the concerts and seeing your work performed live, and then it has choreography and—
- 03-02:04:15
Wyatt: Yeah, it's incredible. I have gone to plenty of concerts. That's the first time I went to a concert where you almost had—in some cases, you had to wear earphones. Not because of the band, but because of the girls, man.
- 03-02:04:27
Cooks: Oh!
- 03-02:04:28
Wyatt: When I took John Scott's daughters and picked them up in limo, when we were coming out of the stadium—what's that big stadium in New Orleans?
- 03-02:04:43
Cooks: Some kind of dome—
- 03-02:04:44
Wyatt: Yeah, Superdome or something like that. Yeah, that's where the concert was. It was like the Superfest or something, and the headliner was Luther Vandross, you know? And so we're sitting there in the back, and he's warming up. And it was like, Man, this is like the warm-ups?
- 03-02:05:06
Cooks: Incredible. I didn't even think that they weren't the headliner.
- 03-02:05:09
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-02:05:10
Cooks: They weren't even the headliner. It was Luther!
- 03-02:05:12
Wyatt: No, no. It was Luther.
- 03-02:05:14
Cooks: Ooo-woo!
- 03-02:05:17
Wyatt: Anyway, so as we're leaving the stadium, I mean, man, the girls just swarmed on the car, just it was crazy! They loved it. [knocks on table] "Are you guys the Jets? Are you the Jets?" Because there's girls in [that family group].

- 03-02:05:34
Cooks: Oh my gosh.
- 03-02:05:34
Wyatt: Oh man, it was funny.
- 03-02:05:39
Cooks: Incredible.
- 03-02:05:40
Wyatt: You know, that whole period of time was just crazy. I think I did two or three shows, and we were coming with the guys from the group Force MDs—
- 03-02:05:52
Cooks: Oh yeah!
- 03-02:05:54
Wyatt: —the ones that did "Tender Love," you know? This one guy, he was [telling]—it's like girls outside [of the limo]—"We'll be at the Maxwell House [Hotel]." [laughs] Letting them know where—[laughs]
- 03-02:06:07
Cooks: Oh no!
- 03-02:06:06
Wyatt: All that stuff you hear about in music and—
- 03-02:06:10
Cooks: It's all true?
- 03-02:06:12
Wyatt: They had fans, and the groupies are even worse. Oh, it was incredible.
- 03-02:06:19
Cooks: This is amazing.
- 03-02:06:21
Wyatt: Yeah, I don't know how girls would get through. And they had security. They would have a whole floor, and the girls would get through some kind of way. And this one girl was just [knocks on the table] knocking on everybody's door. And so I had to call security, "Man, there's another one running around here." It was nuts! I mean, it was really just—you know.
- 03-02:06:40
Cooks: Obsessive.
- 03-02:06:42
Wyatt: Yeah. I mean, fans, fanatics.
- 03-02:06:43
Cooks: It's fanatical.

- 03-02:06:43
Wyatt: Yeah. But back to the live performance thing, yeah, that's the first thing, is: it's loud, because of all the girls hollering. But to see them actually do my song with choreography is great. [Cooks laughs] It was just a great feeling, you know?
- 03-02:07:02
Cooks: Wow!
- 03-02:07:04
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-02:07:05
Cooks: It's wonderful to hear you talk about that.
- 03-02:07:08
Wyatt: And on that particular song, too, as a side note, I think it was back in 2012, Nas wanted to use a sample for his album, *Life is Good* album.
- 03-02:07:23
Cooks: Now which song is it? I couldn't figure that out.
- 03-02:07:25
Wyatt: It's called "Reach Out." I forget who it was, but they used a beat from an early rocker. And they had Mary J. Blige sing the hooks [from "Once in a Lifetime Groove"], and she like nailed it. And of course, Nas does his thing. And I love Nas. I've been a fan since *Illmatic*, you know, so it was great. That was like really a nice tribute, a very nice—
- 03-02:07:52
Cooks: People have to reach out to you to get permission?
- 03-02:07:55
Wyatt: Yeah, publishing and all that stuff, because you've got to get permission to use it, you know? When they first started, when rappers first started sampling it wasn't an issue, you know?
- 03-02:08:04
Cooks: I know, De La Soul, right? Their stuff is just coming out—
- 03-02:08:08
Wyatt: James Brown, you know?
- 03-02:08:09
Cooks: Right.
- 03-02:08:10
Wyatt: All that stuff, you've got to get permission, yeah. I mean, they had to get permission from Leon Sylvers for that N.W.A song. What's that song that what's his name, The D.O.C, did on the N.W.A album? ["It's Funky Enough"]

was the song.] But they used "Misdemeanor," the one that Foster recorded, yeah. [sings melody] Yeah.

03-02:08:33

Cooks: Oh right! Oh my gosh. The layers!

03-02:08:37

Wyatt: Yeah. Early on, it wasn't an issue so much, but then once these people start seeing how much these guys are making, then it became a huge issue. So the best thing to do is always get permission.

03-02:08:52

Cooks: Yes. Okay, I have another song here that we didn't mention, "Don't Turn Your Back on Love."

03-02:08:59

Wyatt: Yeah. Actually, I think it was *the* first song that Kris Young and I got recorded. A producer by the name of Laurin Rinder loved the song in its demo form, and so he did it on [an album for] a woman by the name of Eloise Whitaker, who was really, really nice. That's one thing, too: a lot of these people are really just good people that I've met. In my experience, I haven't met anybody that was—attitude or, yeah. I think I've just been fortunate, because I've heard some horror stories, you know, from other people.

03-02:09:33

Cooks: This is really exceptional. I mean, in the arts and in music, this is where you have so many people with big egos. And "diva," that word comes from opera, you know? Music is the one that's bringing these big egos and personalities, and you've just been able to—

03-02:09:53

Wyatt: Yeah. And it's like the people that are the best and the most talented are the ones with no [ego], they're very humble. Like Gloria Gaynor, I didn't get a chance to work with her, but when I was working at the studio she was there, and she was absolutely the nicest artist that I've ever had the opportunity to meet. Really, really just nice. When they announced that she was nominated for a Grammy, they used a picture of my daughter when she's a little girl, about one or so, and she's got these headphones on and listening to the Gloria Gaynor records here, and a big mega—you know, one of those RCA Victor—
[laughs]

03-02:10:39

Cooks: What, this was a photograph of your daughter?

03-02:10:41

Wyatt: Yeah, it was in the Grammy program for that year, the Grammy program.

03-02:10:45

Cooks: How did that happen?

- 03-02:10:47
Wyatt: Well, because they have to come to the company to see what they want to do advertising-wise, and so Chris wanted to use my daughter—Kiki is her nickname.
- 03-02:11:01
Cooks: Wow!
- 03-02:11:02
Wyatt: Yeah. So and that's how it worked out. [laughs]
- 03-02:11:08
Cooks: This is just blowing my mind, all this is all happening. Okay. Now, here's a question I've been wanting to get the whole story. You did voices for *[The] Flip Wilson [Show]*.
- 03-02:11:19
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 03-02:11:20
Cooks: Now—
- 03-02:11:23
Wyatt: That was a result of Tutor/Art. Because what happened in Tutor/Art, there were a group of kids that were into commercial art and that whole thing, animation, everything. And we attended both classes. And then there was a group that were more fine-art oriented, you know, like working with Charlie. That second half, I would go with Charlie, but the students that were really into graphic arts, after lunch they'd stay and still continue to work. And a lot of those kids really developed into really good animators. This one guy named Bill Davis, who was the one who actually got me—because they needed a certain-aged voice for this character, and it worked out great. So I did a voiceover for—Clerow Wilson was Flip Wilson's character. I was one of his friends growing up at the time, and so I did a voice for that. And then they did another one after that, and I did some more voice work there, too. I wasn't even looking for that. It was a *Forrest Gump* moment, yeah, really truly! [laughs]
- 03-02:12:42
Cooks: So Bill Davis, he was a student? Or he was—
- 03-02:12:46
Wyatt: Yeah, he was a student at the time.
- 03-02:12:47
Cooks: And he was connected already with both—
- 03-02:12:50
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah. See, what happened is, because of the training we got, we were exposed to the top people in the industry, because of that whole program, to work with us. So they knew who we were, and they developed so

fast, a lot of these kids went to work right after high school, to Hanna-Barbera, doing in-betweens and all that stuff. And Bill was a hell of an animator, and he worked on the [show] with Flip Wilson. It was like on NBC, and they did two separate [animation specials] of it. They did the original one, the first one, and then about a year or two later, they did the second one. Yeah. I'm telling you, there was a lot of talent in there.

03-02:13:27

Cooks: So do you remember going to the studio and them giving you the script?

03-02:13:32

Wyatt: Yeah, you get the script, and then they tell you what they wanted. Basically, you just record your part. I'm not looking at any screen or any—you just record your part, and they work it out in the animation, yeah.

03-02:13:45

Cooks: And then you watch it on TV!

03-02:13:49

Wyatt: Yeah. And the beauty of it is that years later, I was able to share it with my grandsons, and they like love it! Man, they were watching it like every day. [laughs] Because the animation is really calm and it's not like all over the place, like now. It's really calm, that period. But it was done so well, and you could really get into the characters. Yeah, it was more character-driven, but it wasn't as—

03-02:14:20

Cooks: Special effects and—

03-02:14:21

Wyatt: You know, attention-span oriented as now. You gave the viewer time to really get into the pace of what was going on then.

03-02:14:35

Cooks: Just incredible. What a wonderful moment, to watch your grandsons.

03-02:14:38

Wyatt: Yeah, that was really good. I really enjoyed that.

03-02:14:44

Cooks: Okay. So I think maybe we'll take a break now.

03-02:14:49

Tewes: Sure. Sounds like a good moment. Thank you, all.

03-02:14:50

Cooks: Okay.

Interview 4: February 7, 2023

04-00:00:00

Tewes: This is a fourth interview with Richard Wyatt, Jr., for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. The interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes on February 7, 2023 in Los Angeles, California. Bridget, take it away!

04-00:00:33

Cooks: Okay. So I'd like us to start by hearing you speak about some of the many murals that you did in the 1980s. I have the Villa Gardens Artificial Kidney Center commission in Los Angeles, 1981 to '82. How did that come about?

04-00:00:54

Wyatt: That came about through an architect, who was the late Oscar Leidenfrost. And he had an architectural firm—I think it was in Glendale—it was called Leidenfrost/Horowitz [and Associates]. He had seen my work. He actually had bought some of my work someplace, and he said he wants to do this mural and everything, and it was down at the center. So of course, I did my research and everything. It was in the Temple District. It's on Temple [St.], right across the street from the police station, kind of almost directly across from it. But anyway, he gave me the information on it and says, "The doctor who runs it/owns it, he likes your work, too." And it was Dr. Bernard Salick. They named a big unit at Cedars[-Sinai Medical Center] for him. And so consequently, I used, once again, people that I knew [as models], and I also used his kids, his daughters; he had three daughters. And that was cool. So the whole thing was based on that. But once again, I have these real kind of lush landscape images as a background, and these people that I knew. I used my daughter, my oldest daughter in it. And when I do use people that I know or have a relationship [with], it keeps me engaged a long period of time, you know? It's part of my own personal process. But yeah, that was based on that.

04-00:02:42

Actually, prior to that, I had done a piece for the same doctor, for a place—it was in South Central, and it was off San Pedro [St.] or something like that. San Pedro near Avalon [Blvd.], or it was around in that area. I did the same thing. It was one of his dialysis units, and I wind up using actual patients a stuff from that—

04-00:03:11

Cooks: Oh wow!

04-00:03:12

Wyatt: Yeah. And there was this guy that lived across the street. He was a character. He had this old, restored Ford truck and everything, and he was real helpful and just good company when I was working on it. And so I put him in the mural. [laughs] His name was Mickey.

04-00:03:32

Cooks: That's great.

04-00:03:35

Wyatt: And you know, I had my buddy Guillermo Anderson actually helping on it. He invited us to go this blues club, which was really cool. Me and my buddy Guillermo went, and it was cool. You know, it was like just regular raw blues, you know? [laughs]

04-00:03:52

Cooks: It was just in the neighborhood?

04-00:03:53

Wyatt: Yeah, he was in the neighborhood. It was like a neighborhood, but it was—I guess the zoning was different. It was a different kind of zoning where they allowed a little bit of commercial along with residential kind of, yeah.

04-00:04:11

Cooks: Wow. And with both of these commissions, did they give you some directive of what they wanted, or did you pitch an idea?

04-00:04:18

Wyatt: No. They wanted me to do something. They didn't have any real direction, they just wanted to see what I came up with. Like I say, on the first one, I came with the idea—well, I want to use the actual patients that go there. What I wanted to do was create an atmosphere that was kind of like a little calming for those who may have been new going there, and for the community—this company being in a community kind of space.

04-00:04:49

Cooks: With the patients, did you draw them while they were getting their services done?

04-00:04:56

Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah. A lot of it, I went in and just like actually saw when they were going through the—

04-00:05:02

Cooks: The treatments?

04-00:05:04

Wyatt: Yeah, dialysis and everything.

04-00:05:08

Cooks: Wow.

04-00:05:10

Wyatt: Yeah, I did it at both places actually.

04-00:05:12

Cooks: Okay! Well, that's a great story. I have in 1984, the Monterey Park Hospital mural.

04-00:05:21

Wyatt: Right, that one came as a result of the Olympic murals that I did, that was commissioned during '84. And they approached me, and he says, "You know, we've got this little, small wall. We want to do something at our hospital." So I did a piece that was kind of based and paid homage to Hippocrates, you know, that whole thing. I had him holding an ancient medical instrument. It wasn't that big at all. I think I finished it in about a week or two.

04-00:05:54

Cooks: It was indoors?

04-00:05:56

Wyatt: It was outdoors. It was on the street.

04-00:05:56

Cooks: It was outdoors, okay.

04-00:05:59

Wyatt: And so that's what that was.

04-00:06:03

Cooks: Richard, were you aware and inspired by some of the WPA [Works Progress Administration] murals? I was just thinking about the murals at Harlem Hospital.

04-00:06:12

Wyatt: Right. Well yeah, indirectly through Charles White, because he did a lot of work for WPA, as well as a lot of other artists during the time. Yeah, I guess I was, in a sense. It wasn't a real conscious effort, I'm doing this because I'm inspired by—it was kind of like in passing, because I saw what Charles White did and other artists that created during that whole period.

04-00:06:42

Cooks: Did you ever spend time in New York going to museums, or did you ever think about moving away from LA?

04-00:06:50

Wyatt: I did at one point, but I really wasn't that wild about living in New York. I mean, I enjoyed visiting and going. One time in '85, I went around, and I had just a painting and my résumé and some slides, and I took it around to some galleries and showed people. I had people really interested, too, but nothing really became of it. And this is like 1985 or so. Like I say, the gallery scene, it was starting to get a few people of color, but it wasn't kind of like the way it is now.

04-00:07:30

Cooks: No, it wasn't as open, and now Black artists are more in vogue than we've ever seen in our lifetime.

04-00:07:38

Wyatt: Yeah. A lot of them are doing really, really good work, so whether it's a style or a fad, the work is still strong, so it's going to keep—that interest will stay there, I think.

04-00:07:50

Cooks: It's interesting, because it's a moment where some people, I think, are doing it for the market. But once they see the work, it's like, Oh, we've been missing out.

04-00:08:04

Wyatt: Yeah. And good work, too.

04-00:08:08

Cooks: I've also seen work that I feel like wasn't ready. [laughs]

04-00:08:12

Wyatt: Yeah. Well you know, that's part of the whole thing: if you approach it from a kind of, you know, fad or flavor of the month kind of mentality, that happens. But that's happened in every period of any kind of art movement, you know? It's like abstract expressionism. There were the really good folks, and then there were like kind of like the knockoffs, and you can tell that they were just doing it because it was a fad, you know? It didn't really resonate like the ones who were pioneers in that movement.

04-00:08:50

Cooks: Okay. I'm excited to hear you talk about the Golden State [Mutual Life] Insurance Company commission, '85, also. An historic business that brought in so many Black leaders, and also Black people, just as the company that would insure us. So your mural, *The Insurance Man*, six feet by fourteen feet, epic, monumental work, oil on board. Could you talk to us about your relationship with Golden State?

04-00:09:29

Wyatt: Sure. My relationship with Golden State started directly with Bill Pajaud. I met Bill like in the early seventies as a student at Tutor/Art, because he was part of the support team for that. And so you know, he kept an eye on my progress. In fact, I first met John Biggers through him, because John Biggers had come through and visited with Charlie and Bill. I remember John Biggers telling me—I was about fourteen or so—he said, "Young man, you have quite a gift. Just keep it up." And that meant a lot to me at that [age], you know? And so yeah, Bill Pajaud, he's key in a lot of artists' lives. I mean you know, you name it: George Evans, Charles Dickson. I mean, because of his, you know, being a part of that class, that's one thing. But then, to amass the collection that he put together, that *he* put together, himself—which unfortunately, they later sold off.

- 04-00:10:42
Cooks: I know.
- 04-00:10:42
Wyatt: But that was quite a collection. I say all that to say, because of that relationship with Bill at an early age, and he saw my development and kind of how I grew into a young artist and everything, that was part of it. I had a commission from, I think it was Cultural Affairs, and I say, "Well, I want to do it at Golden State, and I want to call it *The Insurance Man*, you know?" And I used a—
- 04-00:11:10
Cooks: So he named that, or you named it?
- 04-00:11:13
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah, I named it *The Insurance Man*.
- 04-00:11:15
Cooks: You named it *The Insurance Man*, yes. And you wanted to do it at Golden State?
- 04-00:11:18
Wyatt: And I wanted to do it at Golden State.
- 04-00:11:19
Cooks: Awesome.
- 04-00:11:20
Wyatt: Yeah. And just like with the piece with *Cecil* at the Watts Towers, that was part of Judy [Baca's] program. But I said, "I want to do it at Watts Towers, you know? And so I went on and I established a good rapport, even as an adult, and he gave me good advice. In fact, I got my kids into school based on his recommendation to do it. He says, "You should put them in this school, and so and so," and it worked out really well. They went to Immaculate Heart.
- 04-00:11:48
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-00:11:51
Wyatt: In fact, they were there at the same time as Meghan Markle was there.
- 04-00:11:58
Cooks: Oh! Meghan Markle was there?
- 04-00:11:59
Wyatt: [She] was there, yeah, and they remember her real well. And this is the thing, though: I went to school with her mother at Fairfax High School.
- 04-00:12:09
Cooks: At Fairfax!

- 04-00:12:11
Wyatt: I didn't know her, but I just—
- 04-00:12:11
Cooks: So they lived in the neighborhood. They lived around the corner!
- 04-00:12:13
Wyatt: Yeah, I knew her like really—I mean, the mother. I didn't know her that personally, you know, she wasn't in the crowd that I hung out with, but I do remember her, seeing her on campus and being really pleasant. [Cooks laughs] Really it's funny, because when that happened, all these people were going on and they said, "Oh yeah, that's so-and-so's—"
- 04-00:12:37
Cooks: Wow!
- 04-00:12:38
Wyatt: Yeah, Doria, Doria [Ragland].
- 04-00:12:43
Cooks: Wow, such a small world.
- 04-00:12:45
Wyatt: Yeah. Bill—it worked out great. And then once Charles White passed away, I started doing the Golden State calendars for a couple years. That was like a huge deal, because Charles White had done them prior to that, and it was like an honor to do it.
- 04-00:13:04
Cooks: This is something else that needs to be written about, because that was a way that we saw some great Black artists, was through these calendars.
- 04-00:13:13
Wyatt: Oh yeah. In fact, there's a story that Ian [White] tells, where people would take the calendars, and there was a shoeshine or a newsstand close to Golden State, across the street. And the guy who owned it, he would actually cut out the calendar images and, you know, pin them up. And a lot of people did that.
- 04-00:13:38
Cooks: Oh right.
- 04-00:13:39
Wyatt: His images were so powerful, they'd cut them out of the calendar, and they hung them in their homes, you know? That's how much his work meant to people. In fact, there's a story that Bill Pajaud—he tells a great story. He gets a call from the lady who works in the reception area, "Yeah, there's this guy here just standing around staring at this picture." Right? And this guy had been smoking weed, you know, and he was looking at *General Moses*, because they used to have it in the lobby, you know?

04-00:14:08

Cooks: Oh, *powerful!*

04-00:14:10

Wyatt: And so he's looking at that piece, and so they asked Bill to come down. Because Bill, you know, he deals with all kinds of people, and he knows. He says, "Hey, how are you doing, so-and-so?" And the guy was just standing there, "Oh, I'm doing fine today." And he's looking at it and he said, "Man—" and he was like high as a kite—"Man, this is a bad MF." [laughs]
"You know, I sort of like this!"

04-00:14:34

Cooks: And it *is!*

04-00:14:35

Wyatt: Yeah. And that was it. He was cool. He was just admiring the piece, you know? And whether he was sober or not, it moved him that much. But Charles White's work would do that. It was powerful stuff.

04-00:14:49

Cooks: Powerful, and timeless!

04-00:14:52

Wyatt: Yeah. Well you know, you look at [Romare] "Romie" Bearden's stuff. Man, I mean, all those guys were great. I actually got a chance to meet Jacob Lawrence years ago at John Outterbridge's studio, and it was like a reception thing for him. And Willie Middlebrook took a picture, "Richard, come over here. I want to get a picture," and he took a picture with just me and Jacob. And I wish I had that picture now, but, you know, he's passed on.

04-00:15:17

Cooks: Wow, I know.

04-00:15:18

Wyatt: And I don't know what his family or his estate's doing about it. But yeah, those guys were really, really just fantastic. Elizabeth Catlett! I mean, man, pshoo!

04-00:15:30

Cooks: Did you ever meet Romare Bearden or Elizabeth Catlett?

04-00:15:33

Wyatt: No, I met Elizabeth Catlett one time through Samella Lewis. I remember years ago she was in town visiting or something like that. But you know, she was married to Charlie, I think, before Fran [Francisco Mora].

04-00:15:45

Cooks: I know, a different life.

04-00:15:50

Wyatt: Yeah.

- 04-00:15:51
Cooks: It was a different moment, yeah, for them, yeah.
- 04-00:15:53
Wyatt: Oh yeah.
- 04-00:15:55
Cooks: You know, you mentioned John Outterbridge, and I know—we had mentioned already that you made a piece honoring him for the Compton Unified School District, but I don't think we really talked about the mural itself or your concept for it?
- 04-00:16:07
Wyatt: Right. Well, I know that John was really—he had a unique interest in Egypt and the pyramids and all that stuff, and so I used that as the backdrop for an image of him. And years later, John Outterbridge, Timothy Washington, David Hammons, and—
- 04-00:16:30
Cooks: Ian [White]?
- 04-00:16:30
Wyatt: Ian, yeah. They all went to Africa. David took care [it], he paid for everything, and they all went to Africa, like all over, you know? Ian's got a great picture, too, of all of them.
- 04-00:16:43
Cooks: Incredible.
- 04-00:16:44
Wyatt: They were like riding camels.
- 04-00:16:47
Cooks: That wasn't that long ago.
- 04-00:16:49
Wyatt: Yeah, right, it's pretty recent.
- 04-00:16:50
Cooks: That was really a smart idea.
- 04-00:16:53
Wyatt: Within, like I said, a ten-year—yeah.
- 04-00:16:56
Cooks: Wow.
- 04-00:16:56
Wyatt: So I did the mural long before that, because I knew John had an interest, so I did that mural like '79, '80, around in there. And that's how I wanted to pay homage to him. It was kind of a thank you for what he'd done for me in my career. And then another picture I used of my cousin's son, Little Donny, you

know, we call him. He lived in Compton, and people would come by and see it, "Oh, that's Donny!" And then I did a couple of murals on the other side of the school. One was untitled, but it was an image of an African man; kind of looked South African. And the other piece I did was a picture of an elderly—we called it *Bisabuela*, which is great-grandmother in Spanish, and so I did a picture of her, and it was juxtaposed against a scene in early Mexico, you know?

04-00:18:02

Cooks:

And these were all for the Compton project?

04-00:18:04

Wyatt:

Yeah. And I had total freedom on [that], yeah. And this is before the concept of multiculturalism or any kind of term that they would associate with that. This is what I wanted to do. People I grew up with and seen, and I wanted to represent that.

04-00:18:22

Cooks:

Right, in your city, part of your own trajectory in Compton, yeah.

04-00:18:28

Wyatt:

Right, yeah.

04-00:18:30

Cooks:

So thinking about *The Insurance Man*, I would love to hear you talk a bit about the model that you used.

04-00:18:39

Wyatt:

Yeah, the model was actually a good friend of mine from junior high school, it was his dad. [Cooks laughs] And he was perfect for that, because he had his own business and everything. But the guy could like wear suits, you know, and everything, and he had that kind of corporate look. So he had his briefcase, and I took the pictures at their home with this [room] divider, a kind of Asian style divider in the background, and it worked out perfect. And he kind of reminded me of the insurance man that used to visit us in Compton, and his name was Mr. King. He was loosely based on that, on Mr. King, and he looked really close to him. Yeah. [laughs]

04-00:19:25

Cooks:

Wow.

04-00:19:27

Wyatt:

Some resemblance.

04-00:19:28

Cooks:

Do you remember an insurance man from Golden State?

04-00:19:32

Wyatt:

Yeah, when I was a kid in Compton, yeah.

- 04-00:19:33
Cooks: From Golden State? Because they would make the house calls.
- 04-00:19:35
Wyatt: Yeah, they would make house calls. And we'd get the calendars, and that's where I'd see the Charles White calendars. Yeah.
- 04-00:19:42
Cooks: That's excellent.
- 04-00:19:44
Wyatt: Yeah, it was like a really unique period of time.
- 04-00:19:47
Cooks: You have other work that was in that collection. So there's a work called *E.J. Johnson*.
- 04-00:19:56
Wyatt: Right.
- 04-00:19:57
Cooks: Edgar J. Johnson, who was on the board of directors of Golden State.
- 04-00:19:59
Wyatt: Yeah, exactly.
- 04-00:20:01
Cooks: And was that a drawing or a painting?
- 04-00:20:05
Wyatt: No, that was a painting, and it was commissioned by Golden State.
- 04-00:20:08
Cooks: It was.
- 04-00:20:08
Wyatt: Through, yeah, the suggestion of Bill Pajaud. And I actually met with him and did sketches and took pictures of him. Yeah.
- 04-00:20:15
Cooks: That's terrific.
- 04-00:20:15
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 04-00:20:17
Cooks: I know his name is on one of the historic plaques at the building. And then there's *Woman with Roses*?
- 04-00:20:26
Wyatt: Right, that's actually a piece that they just bought. That was another woman that used to work at the studio that I worked at. And so it was like a little, small oil painting, I want to say, twelve by eighteen, something like that.

04-00:20:44

Cooks:

Okay, wow. And that was oil on canvas. I was looking at their collection online. When they were liquidating it, they had an inventory, and there was a drawing study that they had, also, of *The Insurance Man*. So one of the things that's great about Golden State, the building, is that Bill Pajaud had the foresight to commission these murals inside. So one by Hale Woodruff. One is on Blacks' role in the founding of California, and the other one [is on] Blacks' role in the founding of Los Angeles, if I remember.

04-00:21:28

Wyatt:

Right, right, yeah. Hale Woodruff and Charles Alston, I believe it is.

04-00:21:32

Cooks:

Charles Alston, that's right. Thank you. And so Hale Woodruff's is called [*The Negro in California History:*] *Settlement and Development*, from 1949. And I read that you were involved in, should we say, restoring it?

04-00:21:50

Wyatt:

Yeah, the restoration. There was an area that could be reached from the top, I didn't need scaffolding or anything. If I remember right, the mural was like right here, and then this was another level. [indicating levels with hands] So you could reach over [to] the affected area, and it was a little bit of damage. It looked like water damage or something on the mural, so I went in and treated it the way I would treat any other work that I would restore.

04-00:22:22

Cooks:

Was that the first time you had restored someone else's work where you—

04-00:22:29

Wyatt:

Yeah, it was. Yeah, it was, really. And just mainly you have to match the colors once you restore it. When I got done with it, it just looked like his painting, because I use their same, yeah, colors and everything.

04-00:22:43

Cooks:

How exciting.

04-00:22:44

Wyatt:

Yeah, it was. It really was, yeah. [laughs]

04-00:22:47

Cooks:

It's like an honor, you know?

04-00:22:48

Wyatt:

Yeah, it really was. And that was through Bill Pajaud.

04-00:22:50

Cooks:

Of course it was.

04-00:22:53

Wyatt:

Yeah. Also to mention, when you're talking about the collection, there was another piece—two pieces that I did. One, the *Man Wearing Sunglasses*, that

was part of their collection, too. That was in the lobby. And that piece sold at auction to, oh, the museum in Detroit. Oh man, what is the name of that?

04-00:23:16

Cooks: There's the Detroit Institute of Art.

04-00:23:18

Wyatt: No. It's—

04-00:23:19

Cooks: It's the DuSable [Black History Museum and Education Center]?

04-00:23:23

Wyatt: No, they're in Michigan. [The Mott-Warsh Collection, Muskegon Museum of Art in Muskegon, Michigan.]

04-00:23:29

Cooks: Oh okay.

04-00:23:30

Wyatt: It's in my résumé. But they actually bought that piece and another piece, and it was a piece of my grandmother that I did for the Golden State calendar. It was called *Sister Wyatt*, and she had on her usher's uniform and everything. They thought it would sell for maybe 3 or 4,000, and it sold for \$18,000, which for me, that was like—I mean, I didn't get the money, but pricewise it was really good.

04-00:24:04

Cooks: How long ago was this?

04-00:24:05

Wyatt: This was at the auction, at that Golden State auction. I think it happened like in 2000, but it was through Swann's in New York.

04-00:24:12

Cooks: Yeah, Swann's did that auction. Wow.

04-00:24:15

Wyatt: Yeah, last year I had one that went to auction, and it was a piece that I did called *Anonymous Ancestors*, and it was done like in 19—ah, you'll have to get the year on that one, 1980s, '79. [It was 1979.]

04-00:24:30

Cooks: Okay.

04-00:24:30

Wyatt: But that piece sold for like \$45,000. And it was like for this piece, I wouldn't even guess that. [laughs]

04-00:24:38

Cooks: Is it a drawing?

- 04-00:24:38
Wyatt: It's a drawing. It's like a mixed-media piece, drawing and wash and gouache and everything. And the museum in Washington bought that one.
- 04-00:24:46
Cooks: Oh good! The National Museum of African American History and Culture.
- 04-00:24:49
Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah. They bought that.
- 04-00:24:51
Cooks: Great!
- 04-00:24:53
Wyatt: Mott-Warsh Collection, [Muskegon Museum of Art]. That's the one in [Michigan], yeah.
- 04-00:24:57
Cooks: Oh yes, okay!
- 04-00:24:59
Wyatt: That's where the *Man with Sunglasses* went, and also my grandmother, *Sister Wyatt*. They bought those in the auction.
- 04-00:25:05
Cooks: Okay. This is really good to know.
- 04-00:25:10
Wyatt: Yeah. And they were really glad, because that piece was highlighted a lot in the Charles White show, [*Life Model: Charles White and His Students*]. It was in the film [*Life Model*] by Matt Kresling.
- 04-00:25:19
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-00:25:21
Wyatt: And then also, it appeared in the *Legacy* magazine at LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art]. Yeah.
- 04-00:25:27
Cooks: Oh, that's terrific!
- 04-00:25:29
Wyatt: They were doing that, too, and they got the credit for it, the collection and auction and all that stuff. Yeah, they had a few pieces of mine there.
- 04-00:25:38
Cooks: That's fantastic. Okay.
- 04-00:25:43
Tewes: Can we pause for just one second? [break in recording] We are back from a break. Go ahead, Bridget.

04-00:25:49

Cooks: Okay. So I have in 1987, the Inglewood [High School] project. Would you talk to us about that, please?

04-00:25:56

Wyatt: Sure. It just so happened that the principal who was involved in the Willowbrook [Middle School] project became principal at Inglewood High School. I submitted for a grant from the Pollock-Krasner Foundation in New York and talked about what I wanted to do in my proposal. It was based on the direct history of that land, which is a lot of Native American/Indian land there. And so the main figure is this Native American man. If you look at the background, it's actually a reflection of across the street, directly across the street. What I did in my painting was I mixed some of the Native American housing and structures into my piece, along with the contemporary, the newer architecture which is directly across the street. It's just like a reflection. What I wanted to do was show how it sort of returned back to its original state. Because if you notice on there, I have parking meters, and then some are damaged. I wanted it to look like it was ancient, you know? The contemporary stuff became ancient in my image, and the newer stuff had gone back to its original state, in other words, right?

04-00:27:27

Cooks: And when you're saying you wanted to have it reflect some of that Native American history of the land, of Inglewood, of Inglewood High School?

04-00:27:38

Wyatt: Right, yeah.

04-00:27:41

Cooks: Okay, okay.

04-00:29:08

Wyatt: That whole area, not just the high school, but just that area.

04-00:27:43

Cooks: The larger area around it, yeah.

04-00:27:46

Wyatt: Right.

04-00:27:46

Cooks: Is that still there? That was after—

04-00:27:50

Wyatt: Oh yeah, it's still there. I did it like in '88, and it's still there. The beauty of why it's still there is because it's a north-facing wall, and so that's the best light for any kind of painted surfaces. You can just look at people's houses: the north wall stays pristine. [laughs] But the worst walls are like the south and the west are the worst, south is worst. And [the] Capitol [Records building

mural], when I painted that, [*Hollywood Jazz: 1945-1972*], that was a south-facing wall, so I had to redo it in tile, you know?

04-00:28:22

Cooks: Okay, all right.

04-00:28:25

Wyatt: In ceramic tile.

04-00:28:28

Cooks: We're going to get to that one. I'm excited. I know you have a lot of good stories with that.

04-00:28:32

Wyatt: Oh yeah.

04-00:28:33

Cooks: So Samuel Fryer Hebrew Academy. This was an interior mural.

04-00:28:38

Wyatt: Right.

04-00:28:38

Cooks: In 1988 in Los Angeles. How did that happen?

04-00:28:42

Wyatt: That happened through the recommendation of a woman that used to work at Barnsdall [Art] Park, and her name was Harriet Miller, and she recommended me to do the piece. It actually paid homage to the guy who, his name was David Horne, and his brother had passed away, so the piece was done to pay homage to his brother. I actually included his brother in the piece, and the scene was the Wailing Wall, you know? That was a powerful piece, too. It was moving, because of, you know, that direct subject matter of his brother being in it. And I even used kids from the school as a part of it, and so it was powerful.

04-00:29:41

And then later on, when I first got my studio in Culver City, back—I don't have it anymore, but this is like around the same time, period of time I did this. I was talking to the guy, the owner of the space, real nice—it was called the Spice King, and so the studio always smelled like spice. People used to love to come by. It was a great space. [Cooks laughs] His name was Bart Stern. I said, "Yeah, I've done all kinds of stuff." The conversation got around, he says, "You know what, I talked to David Horne today," and he goes to his temple. And they've known each other for years. And he says, "Oh yeah, [Richard Wyatt's] a great artist," so and so. The world is small, man! And so he hated to see me leave. The only reason I had to leave, because the space was too small, because the work was getting bigger and bigger. And then I went to the fire station and the firehouse [Engine House No. 18] over there in West Adams. But yeah, I really enjoyed that project a lot, and I would run into

David from time to time around town. They really appreciated that piece, you know? Yeah.

04-00:31:00

Cooks: Wow. So the—

04-00:31:01

Wyatt: I went to Fairfax High School, and it was like in the heart of the Jewish community, and it had been around a long, long time.

04-00:31:08

Cooks: Is that the Hebrew Academy over there near Fairfax?

04-00:31:12

Wyatt: Yeah, it was right over there on—well, at the time, it was either Third [St.] or Beverly [Blvd]. I forget exactly.

04-00:31:19

Cooks: Everyone gets those two streets confused.

04-00:31:21

Wyatt: Yeah. But I think it has moved now. I think it's on Olympic now. It's closer to going to Beverly Hills. On Olympic [Blvd.] between Robertson and Beverly Hills High School, somewhere on that street there.

04-00:31:45

Cooks: Oh okay. And the Academy was associated with a temple?

04-00:31:49

Wyatt: Yeah. Well, it was a school. It was called the Samuel Fryer Hebrew Academy.

04-00:31:54

Cooks: Right.

04-00:31:54

Wyatt: And they had grades from kindergarten up until, you know, to high school.

04-00:32:00

Cooks: What was David Horne's association with the school?

04-00:32:03

Wyatt: They were really active at the temple and everything, and they were really very active in supporting the Jewish community. And so they commissioned it. It was like their gift to the temple.

04-00:32:22

Cooks: I see.

04-00:32:23

Wyatt: Yeah. He went to Fairfax High, so that was like, you know? [laughs] I mean, that was like a perk, because it was, "Oh, you went to Fairfax?" "Yeah, I went—" so and so type of thing.

- 04-00:32:33
Cooks: Connected.
- 04-00:32:33
Wyatt: Yeah. And he has a really nice family and everything.
- 04-00:32:36
Cooks: Did you ever know Ernie Barnes?
- 04-00:32:39
Wyatt: No, he lived around there someplace.
- 04-00:32:41
Cooks: He lived around there.
- 04-00:32:42
Wyatt: I think I met him maybe once, and that's the closest that—I never hung out with him. When we used to go up to the galleries on Tuesday nights—
- 04-00:32:56
Cooks: On La Cienega [Blvd].
- 04-00:32:58
Wyatt: —on La Cienega, yeah. I think I ran into Billy Dee Williams, who, he was an artist, too. And I think he was trying to get with Heritage Gallery at that time. This is before I was with them, but I ran into him once.
- 04-00:33:10
Cooks: Oh, that's so interesting. I only mentioned Ernie Barnes, because he lived in that area, and he has a whole set of paintings that he made of Jewish people in the Fairfax District.
- 04-00:33:21
Wyatt: Right, right, right.
- 04-00:33:23
Cooks: I was just wondering. Okay. So we have another association with medicine and science, the National Association for Sickle Cell Disease commission?
- 04-00:33:34
Wyatt: Right, that was just a poster that I did for them.
- 04-00:33:36
Cooks: That's great, okay. So I wonder if you have any reflections, then, about health and your work, or the power of art, or what is it that people are finding you?
- 04-00:33:49
Wyatt: Yeah. Actually, I did another hospital. I did two since then. I did one at the White Memorial [Medical Center] in their newer unit.
- 04-00:34:03
Cooks: In East LA.

- 04-00:34:05
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 04-00:34:05
Cooks: And let me just give the date: 1993.
- 04-00:34:08
Wyatt: Right.
- 04-00:34:08
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-00:34:11
Wyatt: And then right after that shortly, I did one for—
- 04-00:34:12
Cooks: St. Vincent?
- 04-00:34:16
Wyatt: St. Vincent's, [St. Vincent Medical Center], right.
- 04-00:34:18
Cooks: And I have that in 1994 to '95.
- 04-00:34:20
Wyatt: Right. And it was the same art consultant that I worked with, who was Michelle Isenberg, and I worked on a lot of projects with her. Both May [Sun] and I have worked on a lot of projects with her. I did that one with her. I also did the Montebello Police Station. I did some pieces there. They were smaller paintings, but they were commissioned works. And I used people from the community and kids and everything from there, as well, too.
- 04-00:34:49
Cooks: I mean, for you to do this work with patients directly, inside, spending time in hospitals, seeing all the emotional states people are in, you know, when they're coming in and out. Do you have any reflections on your work, on art and health, or why you think people are coming to *you* to be inspired in those spaces?
- 04-00:35:21
Wyatt: I really don't. At that time, my head was at doing works in public places where people live, and so I really wasn't thinking of it then. But now that you posed that, I guess so.
- 04-00:35:39
Cooks: It's quite a lot!
- 04-00:35:40
Wyatt: Yeah, I guess there's something in the work that people really relate to, and they think it would go good in that space, you know? And plus, it's representational, so it's kind of an easier sell, as opposed to works that maybe

have more independent symbolism in it or whatever. Yeah, I think [that] has [a lot] to do with it. I guess the way that I do it, and the way that I try to involve all the elements in creating the work, I think that has a lot to do with it. Yeah.

04-00:36:12

Cooks: Yeah!

04-00:36:15

Wyatt: Yeah.

04-00:36:18

Cooks: Yeah. I mean, it's just terrific that you're, in some cases, using people who are getting treatment. I mean, thinking about the man, David, who's coming to you, and he's experienced a great loss.

04-00:36:35

Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

04-00:36:38

Cooks: And to turn to you to help to—

04-00:36:40

Wyatt: But before that, too, when I do get recommended for a project, they want to see your work. The body of my work, it's real inclusive. It's based initially in the African American community, but it's expanded because the demographics changed, and because of my own life. I was always in a position and put in situations that were far more inclusive, and so that's thanks to my parents, because they made sure of that when we were younger. And so I think that has a lot to do with it. I think people really sense that in the work, so I think that really has a lot to do with it. Yeah.

04-00:37:24

Cooks: I think as someone who's an Angelena, who, your work has been part of my memories of growing up in Los Angeles at different moments, absolutely, people connect with your work, you know, in ways that you would only know if they tell you. But you know, you have millions of people that see your work multiple times over years!

04-00:37:53

Wyatt: You know, I really don't think about that. Like I said, I just initially want to do the best work that I can possibly do, whether it's in a gallery, a museum place, or if it's public. In other words, one doesn't take precedence over another one, they're just as important. That's what I learned from Charles White. He says, "Always do your best work," and that just stayed with me from a kid. [Cooks laughs] Yeah. Some pieces have fallen short. They may not all get there, but you try to be as consistent as possible.

04-00:38:34

Cooks: I don't know if anyone else knows that you've made work that's fallen short.
[laughs]

04-00:38:40

Wyatt: Yeah, I do. [laughs] There have been some pieces where—I don't like that one.

04-00:38:45

Cooks: I think you're the only one. Okay. Hollywood Economic Revitalization Effort mural in Hollywood, 1989. I remember this work. It's no longer there, but it was called *The Muralists*, fifteen feet by twenty feet, in Hollywood. It was at Hollywood [Blvd.] and Hudson [Ave.]. Amanda and I were talking about it. It's kind of a meta mural, right, because it's Laurel and Hardy—

04-00:39:13

Wyatt: Yeah, it's like a mural within a mural.

04-00:39:15

Cooks: Yes.

04-00:39:15

Wyatt: That's why I call it *The Muralists*, because Laurel and Hardy became the muralists. Now, this one had specific things that they wanted to be in the mural. They wanted—oh man.

04-00:39:30

Cooks: Sir Laurence Olivier.

04-00:39:32

Wyatt: Yeah, Lauren Bacall.

04-00:39:35

Cooks: I have Vivien Leigh—

04-00:39:37

Wyatt: Vivien Leigh.

04-00:39:38

Cooks: And James Cagney.

04-00:39:39

Wyatt: Right, right. So that had to be in there. I wasn't that wild about doing that. And so I proposed doing Sidney Poitier. I wanted to do him, because he's part of Hollywood, too, and I wanted to do a piece *just of* Sidney Poitier. And so they said, "Well yeah, we'll check it out and then give—" so I called Fran White, Charles White's widow, because they were good friends, all of them. Charlie was good friends with Harry Belafonte, all those people, you know? They knew Jimmy Baldwin—they called him Jimmy—James Baldwin. I mean, they just knew everybody who was anybody during that period, they knew them. So I called Fran, and Fran had gotten in touch with Sidney and says, "You

know, he wants to meet you." He said, "Oh, that sounds good," so and so. And we were going to do it, but he got tied up last minute for some kind of thing, with some film thing or something, and it couldn't work, so I was like bummed out about that.

04-00:40:41

I wasn't going to do it, but Cecil Ferguson talked me into doing it. It was prophetic what he said, I mean, literally, it was very prophetic. [laughs] He said, "Do it anyway, because you don't know what's going to come of that." So I opted to do the tribute to Lauren Bacall and all the people, and Laurel and Hardy in there. I said, "Well, if I'm going to do it, then I want to do it my way. What I want to do is create a mural within a mural." And I even used some of the actual parts of the building to be a part of the mural. Like I created the illusion that the brick had broken off—or not broken off, but that the brick was being painted over, you know? And it was actually just a painting. It was like this fire alarm thing on the wall, which was a permanent part of the building, so I painted these fake bricks around it to make it look like they had just painted it over the mural. And so it was like a mural within a mural, and people really liked it a lot. But as a result of doing that—Cecil was right, because that's when I got the offer to do [the] Capitol [Records Building mural]. It was just so prophetic. He says, "You'll never know where it leads," and that's what it led to, doing the Capitol [Records] project.

04-00:42:00

Cooks: You never know. And that's—

04-00:42:02

Wyatt: What happened is there was a woman who was part of the LA Jazz Society, and oh, she was really good. Oh man, just another senior moment.

04-00:42:15

Cooks: It'll come to you.

04-00:42:16

Wyatt: I can see her face so clear.

04-00:42:17

Cooks: Yeah, that's fine.

04-00:42:19

Wyatt: Aarons. Teri Merrill-Aarons, Teri Merrill-Aarons.

04-00:42:25

Cooks: Teri Merrill-Aar—

04-00:42:27

Wyatt: Yeah, Teri Merrill. I think it's M-e-r-i-l-l, or two Rs. You can look it up [Teri Merrill-Aarons].

04-00:42:37

Cooks: Sure!

04-00:42:37

Wyatt: But she was like the president of the Los Angeles Jazz Society, and she says, "Would you be interested?" I love jazz, you know? And so she said, "You've got to look around for a wall." And I said, "Well, if we're going to do it, I've been looking at this wall in front of Capitol for years. So I did a whole maquette and gave them the concept, and they loved it. And they didn't have to pay anything, because it was sponsored by the Cultural Affairs Department. Joe Smith was the president [of Capitol] at the time, the CEO, and he saw it and he says, "Yeah, man, this is great. I just have one request. Could you put Ella Fitzgerald?" And I said, "Man, yeah! That's a no-brainer. Ella Fitzgerald is fine. I love her!" But it worked out really great, you know, as a result of doing the Laurel and Hardy mural.

04-00:43:29

Cooks: Right, you did that, and that's—it's about getting the right people to see your work, and then it takes off from there.

04-00:43:38

Wyatt: Yeah. Because that was the first piece I did in Hollywood, was *The Muralists*, you know?

04-00:43:40

Cooks: Okay.

04-00:43:41

Wyatt: Yeah. Most of my work was in South Central, kind of in the city.

04-00:43:45

Cooks: Right.

04-00:43:45

Wyatt: With the exception of the pieces that I do for corporations or museums.

04-00:43:52

Cooks: And the pieces for corporations, are those some of the ones that we've already talked about?

04-00:43:56

Wyatt: Yeah. One that we did for Southern California Gas Company, and that was Lora Schlesinger, I think. I did a mural, [*California Moment*], for them there at Southern California [Gas Company], and they loved my work so much they also bought a couple of my paintings, too.

04-00:44:25

Cooks: Terrific.

- 04-00:44:26
Wyatt: Yeah, which is really cool. I mean, that was very much needed during that period of time.
- 04-00:44:31
Cooks: When was that around?
- 04-00:44:34
Wyatt: When did I do that? I was still in my Culver City studio, because it was just small enough to do it in there. Yeah. So that had to be around '90. It was during the same time I was at Irvine, because I remember I used one of my students. [It was 1991.]
- 04-00:44:57
Cooks: Okay, '92?
- 04-00:44:58
Wyatt: Yeah, probably '92, because that was one of my students that worked on it with me. He needed to make money, and I was working on a project. I said, "Well yeah, you work—" because they had a daughter. He was married and they had a daughter that was at UCLA Hospital or something like that, so I tried to help him out as much as possible on that.
- 04-00:45:18
Cooks: Okay. I didn't know that Southern California Gas Company had an art collection.
- 04-00:45:22
Wyatt: Oh, they've got a huge [collection], because of Hunsaker/Schlesinger [Gallery]. And there was a catalog and everything, and it's in the catalog. I have the catalog for that. Yeah.
- 04-00:45:29
Cooks: Okay. I'm learning so much about just LA history!
- 04-00:45:38
Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah.
- 04-00:45:40
Cooks: Okay. Well, you've mentioned *Cecil*, and he's next on my list. This is one of my favorites by you, on the Watts Towers Art Center in 1989. So seventeen by twenty-four feet, and this was part of the Neighborhood Pride Program. Would you talk to us about that?
- 04-00:46:03
Wyatt: Right. The Neighborhood Pride Program was administered through SPARC [Social and Public Art Resource Center], which is Judy Baca's baby, as you know. It was a program that employed artists from different communities to put murals wherever they wanted, at real specific communities. I think they did work in East LA, West, all over the place. But you can choose where you wanted to do it, and I chose to do my piece in Watts, because Cecil

[Ferguson] had grown up in Watts, you know? And my father and Cecil got along really well, because Cecil was older than my dad, but they knew all the same schools. My dad went to Jefferson [High School], he went to Jordan [High School]. He knew the same people. They really related a lot, because they could talk about stuff during the period. They had a great relationship, as well as with Claude Booker. Claude Booker had passed away years before, I think. Yeah.

04-00:47:01

Cooks: Right! Years before, yeah.

04-00:47:03

Wyatt: Yeah. And so I wanted to do that, because that's how I met Cecil. I met Cecil and Claude around the same period of time, and that was through the Black Arts Council and just being in shows. They really supported the work. And consequently, they were asked to be the consultants on the *Black Omnibus* TV series.

04-00:47:28

Cooks: Oh! Right.

04-00:47:29

Wyatt: And so they were responsible for getting a lot of the artwork there, and my work was there.

04-00:47:33

Cooks: What a brilliant idea!

04-00:47:35

Wyatt: Yeah. And they had, I mean, all kinds of work. They did an interview with Charles White on there. They had people from the art community. They had people from film. They had recording artists there. I think The Sylvers were there when it first came out.

04-00:47:48

Cooks: Performing art, maybe dance kind of things?

04-00:47:53

Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah. Paula Kelly was on there, and they had—oh, what's his name, the writer—Alex Haley.

04-00:48:00

Cooks: It's incredible.

04-00:48:03

Wyatt: I think it was fresh off of *Autobiography of Malcolm X*, and then he was talking about this idea of doing *Roots*, you know? [laughs]

04-00:48:14

Cooks: Wow!

04-00:48:17

Wyatt:

Yeah, it was amazing. It was really an amazing period of time, especially from this end of it, looking, you know, back.

04-00:48:24

Cooks:

Right. Well, I know that we talked a bit about your community of artists and your relationship to art institutions in LA. And it starts so early for you, it's just been a whole part of your life. But there was a story that you had mentioned about the Watts Summer Festival and Tommy Jacquette, and we wanted to get that on film.

04-00:48:50

Wyatt:

Right, Tommy Jacquette. I think I may have met him just once during that period, because I was a kid. But Tommy Jacquette, he was the person over the Watts Summer Festival that happened every year since, I think since the riots, '65 rebellion. That's what it was called. It was called the Watts Summer Festival, and they had art, which is where Cecil and Claude came in. Because they were responsible for the art, which they usually had in the museum—I mean, not the museum, in the gymnasium at Will Rogers Park. It's called something different now. I think it's named after Ted Watkins or something now, but it was Will Rogers Park at one point. Every year they would put up a show there. And this festival was fantastic. I remember one evening me and my dad went down there just to check it out in the evening, you know? I mean, the people were just having a great time, and there was like some people playing congas and everything. And then as you were leaving, James Brown had just come out with "Say it Loud—I'm Black and I'm Proud," [laughs] that whole thing. And just the visual of leaving, and you could hear it all throughout the park and people were dancing, just that visual of seeing that, it was a beautiful night. It was just classic, you know? [laughs] It was just really classic.

04-00:50:21

Cooks:

Wow.

04-00:50:23

Wyatt:

That was like probably my favorite Watts Festival, because I did attend it at night, because I was too young to go in there at night earlier, so that was a whole new thing.

04-00:50:33

Cooks:

Wow.

04-00:50:34

Wyatt:

But that was great. They also had a band perform and everything, and they had a parade and, I mean, it was quite an event, and people looked forward to it every year. It was no problems.

- 04-00:50:50
Cooks: And so one night you went early, right? A band was going to play. You were going to be in a show, you were going to be in one of the art presentations, right? And you were saying that Tommy Jacquette walked in? Is that right?
- 04-00:51:06
Wyatt: No, no, no.
- 04-00:51:07
Cooks: Okay, I got the story—
- 04-00:51:10
Wyatt: Oh no, no, you were thinking about the Diana Ross story, yeah.
- 04-00:51:11
Cooks: I was! Is that part of the Watts Summer Festival?
- 04-00:51:14
Wyatt: Yeah, that is a part of Watts Summer Festival.
- 04-00:51:16
Cooks: Okay, we—
- 04-00:51:18
Wyatt: It was at a show. We talked about that.
- 04-00:51:19
Cooks: I don't think we talked about it—
- 04-00:51:21
Tewes: Not on tape. [laughs]
- 04-00:51:22
Cooks: The camera wasn't on.
- 04-00:51:23
Wyatt: Oh! Oh okay. Wow, yeah.
- 04-00:51:25
Cooks: So I'd love it if you—
- 04-00:51:26
Wyatt: Okay, yeah, no problem.
- 04-00:51:28
Cooks: See, what's happened, Richard, is that I'm just talking to you, and sometimes we haven't even started recording yet.
- 04-00:51:35
Wyatt: [laughs] Oh okay! Okay.
- 04-00:51:36
Cooks: So you did tell the story, but not with the camera on.

04-00:51:38

Wyatt:

Yeah. Well, okay, what happened is that I believe it's the same day that Ulysses Jenkins did his whole documentation of the art show. And he interviewed Claude, who was like the main narrator during that whole time, and then he talked about the show. But before that all happened, I got there early, because I got a special pass out of school in which to be a part of it. And so I'm standing there looking at the work, and I'm standing by my work, and me and my dad are talking to some people there. And in comes a small entourage, and it got closer. And I recognized Berry Gordy and the guards—they used to call them the Gordy Guards—you know, with him. And I see this beautiful woman with him, dressed up mod, you know, everything. You know, just think of all the movies she's been in and everything. And so she gets closer and closer, and I said, "Oh, that's Diana Ross, man!" And one thing about her eyes, man, she's got the most beautiful eyes. You know, they'll take you away, that's for sure.

04-00:52:50

Cooks:

Did you ever do a drawing of her?

04-00:52:52

Wyatt:

I've never done a drawing of her. But her eyes are just beautiful. She was asking me questions about my work, and I explained it to her and everything. And yeah, she was really into it. And so they were leaving, and she said, "Oh, it was just nice talking to you," and she kissed me on my cheek, you know? Man, I told everybody from school and everything. Man, you know!

04-00:53:22

Cooks:

Oh wow!

04-00:53:24

Wyatt:

Yeah, it was really, really amazing. And I said, too, that if I ever met her later on in life, that I'd tell her to kiss the other side, you know? [laughs]

04-00:53:34

Cooks:

But you never know, you never know.

04-00:53:37

Wyatt:

Yeah, you never really know. Yeah.

04-00:53:40

Cooks:

Wow.

04-00:53:41

Wyatt:

Yeah. And on that same note, talking about relations. My grandmother's brother had married Esther Hinton, years ago, and they also lived in Detroit, too. And we find out later on, because she used to come up here, she was related to the Gordys. And her favorite uncle was Berry Gordy's father. You know, we called him Pop Gordy, and then he would come up here almost every Sunday and have dinner. He liked my mom's cooking.

- 04-00:54:13
Cooks: He'd come here, here to the house?
- 04-00:54:15
Wyatt: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Yeah, we've got some pictures someplace. He's holding my daughter when she's a baby.
- 04-00:54:23
Cooks: Wow!
- 04-00:54:23
Wyatt: Yeah. But it just shows you like the small world thing, you know? I just happened to think of that, because we were talking about Berry Gordy and that whole thing. So it's like, I mean, man! [laughs]
- 04-00:54:36
Cooks: It's really all unbelievable.
- 04-00:54:40
Wyatt: Yeah, right, yeah. And it's weird. It's really kind of unbelievable to me talking about it now. [laughs] Because it's stuff that I just kind of locked away, you know, and it's nice to be able to remember all this stuff.
- 04-00:54:52
Cooks: Well, we're grateful, because this is all news to me, and to a lot of the future researchers that are going to be reading the transcript. And I wanted to ask you: picking up on something you told us earlier, the piece that you had regarding lynching at the Dorothy Chandler [Pavilion].
- 04-00:55:16
Wyatt: Right, right.
- 04-00:55:16
Cooks: Guilty or Not?
- 04-00:55:18
Wyatt: Yeah, *Guilty or Not?* [with a] question mark. Yeah.
- 04-00:55:22
Cooks: Okay. And how impressed I was on being so young and so bold. And you know, I wonder: how you think of yourself as an artist? Like would you describe yourself as an activist? Do you think about activism as part of your practice?
- 04-00:55:45
Wyatt: Not really. I mean, I'm not like an overt activist like somebody who's out there on the front lines. It just so happens that the work that I do deals a lot with social justice, and I look for sort of like the common elements in society. And I look at that from a past kind of perspective to what's going on now. And I've always done that, you know, that correlation. And a lot of the images—especially back then, if you were just to draw like a Black figure, it was

controversial, it was political. You know, it was kind of par for the course. Yeah.

04-00:56:39

Cooks: Right. Yeah, that's—

04-00:56:42

Wyatt: Yeah, without being really overt about it, you know, it was just, this is what I want to talk about. I like Muhammad Ali. I have pictures of him. Yeah.

04-00:56:52

Cooks: And that is something that really makes sense to me, too, because just showing a Black figure, it's hard for people to think of that as standing for humanity.

04-00:57:04

Wyatt: Right, yeah.

04-00:57:05

Cooks: It's like, Oh, there's a message here. Well, sometimes there's a message. but sometimes—

04-00:57:09

Wyatt: Yeah. But sometimes it's just—

04-00:57:11

Cooks: A man.

04-00:57:12

Wyatt: Yeah, or a Black woman sitting down at a table or out in the park, just enjoying life, you know? [laughs]

04-00:57:21

Cooks: Right, right. We're thinking still about, yeah, your identity as an artist, and you have mentioned that you had a studio from—I guess based on different projects, the size of your work demanded different space. And do you have a studio now?

04-00:57:46

Wyatt: No, I don't, but I'm in the process of getting one right now.

04-00:57:48

Cooks: Oh, you are? Okay.

04-00:57:49

Wyatt: Just to do my own work. You know, a lot of times I'll just work here, or it just depends. Like I'm doing a lot of drawing now, so that can be done anywhere, kind of like. But prior to that, when I was a kid, I used to work in my den at home in Compton, you know, and that's where I did all my work. My first actual studio was in Culver City, right there off La Cienega and Washington. You know, I had a lot of studio visits, and I was part of the Venice Art Walk,

so it was pretty exciting. But I was doing my own work, but I was doing a lot of commissions at the same time. So what happened is that the commissions got larger and larger, and I could no longer—I loved that space, too, man! The guy begged me to stay. He says, "Oh, they're going to do a bunch of renewal and repair our buildings." Which they did. They did a whole number on that whole—

04-00:58:57

Cooks: That whole area was with the new galleries.

04-00:58:58

Wyatt: Yeah.

04-00:58:58

Cooks: Right down there, yeah.

04-00:59:00

Wyatt: Oh yeah, they did a whole number on that. And you know, I said, "I'd love to stay, but it's just that I've got to have a bigger space." He says, "It's always [here] if you want to come back." Later on they sold it, his company. Now, it's like you can tell, somebody really did a number on it. Because it was perfect, it was like a perfect spot.

04-00:59:22

Cooks: Was that in the nineties?

04-00:59:25

Wyatt: That was in the nineties. Yeah, it was in the nineties.

04-00:59:28

Cooks: And then you had the firehouse. That had more space. You talked about that.

04-00:59:31

Wyatt: Oh, a lot more space, yeah, the firehouse. The first two projects were kind of simultaneous. One was the Wilshire/Western Subway Station, which I did in tile. That was the first time I ever worked in tile. And the consultant for that and the person who taught me how to work with tiles and glazing was Stan Wilson, Stanley Wilson. And Stanley Wilson, he used to teach at Cal Poly Pomona. He was a professor there of sculpture and everything, ceramics. I mean, he was a godsend, in terms of that, because he taught me everything about it. And so I worked on that project there, and then at the same time, I worked on Union Station, the *City of Dreams, River of History* mural. I think I told you about how I painted sideways—was the camera on during that?

04-01:00:26

Cooks: Yes, the camera was on for that. Yes, that was helpful.

04-01:00:29

Wyatt: Okay, okay.

- 04-01:00:29
Cooks: Because when we went to see it, and we saw it was in aluminum, we thought, we'll have to definitely ask him: did he work on a scaffolding or painted it ahead of time?
- 04-01:00:38
Wyatt: No, no. It was painted in sections. There's no way I'd get that high.
- 04-01:00:42
Cooks: It's really high.
- 04-01:00:41
Wyatt: I mean, the bottom of the mural is like fifty feet off the ground, you know?
[laughs]
- 04-01:00:47
Cooks: Right. And it is a major thoroughfare for transportation.
- 04-01:00:49
Wyatt: Yeah. It's a great surface to work on, though, because honeycomb aluminum paneling is what they use on airplanes, because it is so light. I mean, it's just super light. And the people that did my installation for me, Duane Chartier and his wife, Susanne Friend, they've done most of my installations for me, and big time. They were both conservators, you know? In fact, they were consulted on the restoration of *The Last Judgment* at the Sistine Chapel in—
- 04-01:01:24
Cooks: Really? Wow.
- 04-01:01:25
Wyatt: Yeah. In fact, he says, "Oh, I can get you up there if you want." I say, "Man, I'd love to. I just can't go now." But I would have loved to, because I did have a chance to see it back in 1974 when I backpacked through Europe. But they set up that whole system for me and that support, and it worked out great. But they were brilliant. Really. I think he was like a former nuclear physicist or something like that, and just decided to go into art! [laughs]
- 04-01:01:54
Cooks: That doesn't happen every day.
- 04-01:01:54
Wyatt: No, no. It really doesn't. Yeah.
- 04-01:01:58
Cooks: We've talked a little bit about, in your creative process, music, because you are also a musician. Do you listen to music when you're making—
- 04-01:02:12
Wyatt: All the time! [Cooks laughs] All the time. In fact, as a kid, when I first started painting and drawing in Compton at home, right after, like say, the [Watts] Chalk-In, I started getting really serious about it and I bought an easel and

everything. And I've always listened to music, like jams, [John] Coltrane, you know? I love Coltrane and McCoy Tyner, and listened to Miles Davis and Thelonious Monk, and of course Sarah Vaughan, Billie Holiday. And contemporary stuff, too: the Temptations and what was going on in Motown. Just a wide range of music. And we also had a lot of classical music that my parents were into. You know, listening to classical music, because they both sung and everything.

04-01:03:01

Cooks:

Okay. I know we've talked about this a little bit, so maybe I'm not sure if you feel like there's more that you want to say. I guess there's something that I want to get to. If I write about your work, this is the kind of thing I would love to explore is—and I mentioned this—that, yes, you are a figurative artist. One of the words that you've used, though, that's been interesting for me when you talk about work, is "illusion." And there's something also surrealist about your work to me.

04-01:03:37

Wyatt:

Yeah, it is, yeah.

04-01:03:40

Cooks:

And conceptual, as well. Yes, but it is figurative, but the figure is in service of a vision.

04-01:03:49

Wyatt:

Exactly, yeah.

04-01:03:49

Cooks:

Anything you'd want to say about abstraction or conceptualism, if there's anything else you feel like you'd want to share?

04-01:03:59

Wyatt:

Well yeah. Like I say, ever since I was in Gary Lloyd's class when I got kicked out of one class [Cooks laughs] and I wound up there—and that was like the best thing that could have ever happened. I mean, you know, you're talking about making lemonade out of a lemon. That was like the best thing, because that class was perfect. And also, May Sun had that class, too. He was just a great instructor, and he knew a lot of artists of that time—Vito Acconci, Chris Burden—you know, he just knew everybody from that whole time period, all the up-and-coming conceptual artists. So that does have a big role in my thought process when I'm developing some public artworks, but mostly my gallery art, my private—

04-01:04:49

Cooks:

Okay.

04-01:04:49

Wyatt:

Yeah.

04-01:04:50

Cooks:

Okay, all right. You prefer to work from life. We were talking about models, and it's great to think about those relationships that you have with people in your life, and then how you extend that circle when it makes sense, if the subject or the location—if there is a story there, and you can use patients or children or families, that kind of thing.

04-01:05:21

Wyatt:

Yeah. Well, the thing is, is that in general, most of the pieces that I do, either drawings or paintings, they take a tremendous amount of time, you know? They're really labor intensive, because that's just the way that I work. [laughs] When I'm into a project or into working on a piece, I try to devote as much attention as possible to that in my process. You know, I want to really thoroughly exhaust every possible possibility in the way that I'm interpreting what I'm doing and everything else. So yeah, that's part of it. I used to have people pose for me live a lot, but the work just became so, you know, intense and took quite a while; I couldn't have people pose that long. So I would do sketches, and then I would take photographs, and use that as a reference, too. But photographs, you can only use those so far, because they're like really flat, you know? And like I say, I'm interested in illusion. You look at a photograph, and it's just basically one lens focused on—I mean, the kind of photography that I grew up on, there was like one lens focused on an entire room. For instance, if you focus in on the main image, the background's going to be fuzzy or whatever.

04-01:06:41

Cooks:

Right.

04-01:06:42

Wyatt:

One lens compared to two eyes, which gives you that three-dimensional view. Because if you close one of your eyes and you look at—like I'm looking at you, but if I close the other [eye], it's a slightly different angle, you know? One you're more direct on this way, you're more this way. So when you have both eyes focused on that, you're getting a three-dimensional [image], you're getting an illusion more so, because that's the way we see and the way we interpret stuff in space. But besides that, you're also getting the background in focus, too. Everything that's going on is in focus. So those are the kind of things that I was interested in. When I teach, that's the kind of things I like to really point out to students. Yeah, right.

04-01:07:34

Cooks:

Okay. I wonder if you have any stories about what it's like when you do work in public, you know, where people are stopping and trying to talk to you.

04-01:07:49

Wyatt:

Oh yeah!

04-01:07:50

Cooks:

How do you handle that?

- 04-01:07:52
Wyatt: Yeah, when I first started doing it, that happened a lot. But what happened is, is I learned how to work and talk at the same time. [laughs]
- 04-01:07:58
Cooks: Wow.
- 04-01:07:59
Wyatt: You know? And it's really cool, because people don't feel offended because I'm working and because I'm still holding a conversation with them, and I'm still working. Of course, when they got bigger and bigger, it's hard to hold a conversation.
- 04-01:08:10
Cooks: [laughs] Yeah.
- 04-01:08:12
Wyatt: People there on the ground, and I'm twenty-seven feet up in the air.
- 04-01:08:15
Cooks: Right.
- 04-01:08:15
Wyatt: But yeah, I learned how to talk, engage with the community and still work. Like a classic example was the Willowbrook [Middle School] project. It was ten feet at its highest off the ground, so everything could be reached pretty much from the ground, with the exception of the real top stuff; I used a little ladder or something. But it was mostly people would just come by and talk and everything else, you know?
- 04-01:08:41
Cooks: Is the Willowbrook project, is that the same as the Compton project?
- 04-01:08:44
Wyatt: Yes, yes, I'm sorry, it's on Willowbrook [Junior High School], yeah, but it's Compton Unified School District.
- 04-01:08:49
Cooks: That's what I thought, I just wanted to clarify that.
- 04-01:08:51
Wyatt: Yeah, it's on Willowbrook, it's on Willowbrook Junior High School.
- 04-01:08:56
Cooks: Okay, in the Compton School District.
- 04-01:08:58
Wyatt: Yes.
- 04-01:08:59
Cooks: Okay, perfect. We talked a little bit about selling your work, we talked about auctions. Also the show that allowed you to go to Europe. I'm curious about

your collectors. I mean, sometimes they're friends and family, and I'm sure they probably still are, but you also have other major collectors—that we haven't talked about on camera—who are amassing your work. I don't know, do you develop relationships with collectors over time? Or—

04-01:09:42

Wyatt: I really don't.

04-01:09:44

Cooks: Okay.

04-01:09:44

Wyatt: I just really don't. I don't have that chip, computer chip to do that. I just do the work, and I don't really—I mean, I appreciate [them]. Like for instance, Joy, Dr. [V.] Joy Simmons, she's been collecting my work ever since she was in college. So you know, I have a special thing with her, in terms of collecting.

04-01:10:07

Cooks: Sure.

04-01:10:08

Wyatt: And then her daughters are about the same age as my daughters, and they went to school, at one point, together.

04-01:10:12

Cooks: Oh!

04-01:10:14

Wyatt: So it's like there's a real special thing. And anytime we talk, I always ask her, "How are your babies doing," you know, stuff like that. So you know, that was really special, because she was serious about it while she was still in college, and she started collecting her—

04-01:10:27

Cooks: Incredible.

04-01:10:29

Wyatt: I love Joy. She's just really one of my favorite people, you know?

04-01:10:36

Cooks: And she's so critical to the Black art scene in Los Angeles now.

04-01:10:38

Wyatt: Oh yeah, oh yeah.

04-01:10:39

Cooks: You know, still.

04-01:10:41

Wyatt: Yeah. And her daughter, Naima [Keith].

04-01:10:42

Cooks: Yes. And Naima, sure, yeah, absolutely.

04-01:10:45

Wyatt: Oh yeah. And Amy was a little kid.

04-01:10:46

Cooks: Yeah. [laughs]

04-01:10:48

Wyatt: Yeah. I mean, it's really great!

04-01:10:52

Cooks: Yeah, okay. And you didn't have a gallery that you've worked with for your whole [career], like Charlie had Heritage. You didn't have that sustained year-to-year thing, yeah.

04-01:11:00

Wyatt: No, like I said, I was represented by Heritage Gallery for about maybe a couple of years or so. But then, I started really doing murals. I was still in school and everything, and it was kind of tough to—you know, I was still much younger, you know what I mean? I did it, but I was becoming more and more interested in doing art in public places. And then plus, like I say, it was far more lucrative, because if I work on a commission for a couple of years, that means I'm getting paid a couple of years.

04-01:11:37

Cooks: That's amazing, yeah. So one of the things that we always ask people who are part of this amazing oral history project is about how they navigated instances of racism, anti-Blackness. You know, I mean, we all have to do it, no matter what field we're in. [laughs] But I wanted to ask you, too: did that ever become a real problem for you? Or were you able to just continue to do what you were meant to do despite it?

04-01:12:15

Wyatt: Yeah. Because I always put myself in situations where if I was going to be involved in something—and I've been pretty fortunate in that respect—I always wind up working with people that get it, you know? There have been some times when I've showed up, especially when I was younger, showed up for shows, and people [give me] the third degree until they see the work, and then the whole thing changes—or they find out who I am. [laughs] But you know, those are far and few in between. But it's just the regular experiences that I went through as a Black male. Getting pulled over by the police, you know, and that kind of stuff.

04-01:13:01

Cooks: Yeah, just the daily experiences that we have. Okay.

04-01:13:05

Wyatt:

Yeah. Like I say, I just focus on what I have to do, in terms of the work, but I also focus on—people like Charlie and Pajaud and all of them—you try to focus on being a person that passes along knowledge and try to help the next group of people.

04-01:13:27

Cooks:

Right, because we think about Charles White not being able to see his own shows.

04-01:13:31

Wyatt:

Yeah. I mean, he told me a story where he had won this big award thing—I think it was in Florida—and he went by train to go pick it up. I think it was a show, and he got there, and they said, "Oh, we made a mistake." I think he said he was sick all the way back. Those guys were really on the front line, in terms of, you know, talking about opening doors and making it [happen]. And Charlie's been kind of like a real staple, in terms of his whole career, being the first person to do a lot of stuff, like at the County [Museum], the show that he did with David [Hammons] and Timothy [Washington].

04-01:14:18

Cooks:

Right.

04-01:14:19

Wyatt:

You know, he's just always been like that. So when you see that happen to that generation of people, it gives you more strength to say, "Well, you know what? I'm going to do as much as I can to make sure it's better for the next [person]." And it isn't just on the part of African American folks. I had a real dear friend of mine, whose dad lost his whole family during the Holocaust, and then he came over here, and he started his life and family. It's like as heart-wrenching as any other story you hear, you know? But despite all that, he still tried to live his life and to raise a family, and his kids did very, very well. So those kind of things, when they happen, they're traumatic. I think I heard someplace it's like when something happens bad to you, even though you get over it, you still have a remembrance of it. Like if you get a scratch or something, a bad cut, and it heals up, you feel better. You don't think about it, but every once in a while, you look at it and you can remember how you got it. It's kind of like that. But you just keep going, you know?

04-01:15:41

Cooks:

Right.

04-01:15:41

Wyatt:

And you keep associating with people that kind of share your same values in life and humanity. And consequently, that led me to being around a whole bunch of different folks from different cultures. And you know, it makes life rich.

04-01:15:56

Cooks:

Right, and—

- 04-01:15:57
Wyatt: And my family! I mean, I've got Asian folks, Latino folks, Jewish folks, Germany, you know, it's just like you have a pretty blended family, so it's like it shows you from generation to generation how things are changing. I mean, there's still a lot of challenges that we have.
- 04-01:16:17
Cooks: Yes.
- 04-01:16:18
Wyatt: But basically, things are really changing. I mean, you can tell, yeah.
- 04-01:16:26
Cooks: Great.
- 04-01:16:28
Wyatt: But it's always a fight.
- 04-01:16:27
Cooks: Thank you. Right, yeah. You had a number of exhibitions in some of the galleries that we've talked about already in the 1980s. One that I'm just going to pick out to discuss was at the Heidelberger Kunstverein?
- 04-01:16:49
Wyatt: Yeah, Heidelberger Kunstverein, I think it was. If I remember correctly, I think it was a show that was based on the '84 Olympics. It's been so long. What year was that, '84?
- 04-01:17:04
Cooks: We'll check the date. I have 1982.
- 04-01:17:08
Wyatt: Nineteen eight-two?
- 04-01:17:09
Cooks: We can double check and see.
- 04-01:17:11
Wyatt: Yeah, double check the date on that, but, I mean, it's been so long. But it was a show that was based on mural work some kind of way.
- 04-01:17:19
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-01:17:21
Wyatt: That's all I can remember on that.
- 04-01:17:22
Cooks: And this was in Koln, Germany.
- 04-01:17:25
Wyatt: Yeah.

04-01:17:26

Cooks: Did you go out for the show?

04-01:17:29

Wyatt: No, no, because remember, in 1974 I backpacked through Germany, and in '82, there was just no way I could afford it with a family at that time, yeah. No way, unless they paid for it.

04-01:17:40

Cooks: And how did they find you?

04-01:17:42

Wyatt: I think it was through a mural program kind of thing. They had several muralists, from what I remember. It's been so long ago, but I think it was several muralists that they showcased in this particular exhibition. I think that Kent Twitchell was in it. It was a bunch of muralists, from what I can remember of it.

04-01:18:07

Cooks: Okay.

04-01:18:08

Wyatt: Yeah. I mean, it's so long ago.

04-01:18:09

Cooks: Yes.

04-01:18:09

Wyatt: But that's what I do remember. And in fact, I thought it was later than '82, but—

04-01:18:14

Cooks: Yeah, it might be. Okay.

04-01:18:16

Wyatt: But I do remember that it was associated with muralism. That's what the show was about, yeah.

04-01:18:23

Cooks: Okay. All right. You had an exhibition at the Santa Monica Museum of Art, *Richard Wyatt: Central Avenue Jazz*, and this was not a mural project.

04-01:18:37

Wyatt: No.

04-01:18:38

Cooks: And it wasn't drawing. This was a different kind of installation where it—

04-01:18:40

Wyatt: Yeah, it was an installation. And what happened is that my name came up, and I was suggested as a possible artist to do—it was called the *Artist Project Series*, and it was the Santa Monica Museum of Art at that time.

- 04-01:18:58
Cooks: At Bergamot, it was—
- 04-01:18:59
Wyatt: No, no, it was on Main St.
- 04-01:19:00
Cooks: Oh okay.
- 04-01:19:01
Wyatt: It was a building, I think, that was renovated by [Frank] Gehry or someone, I think.
- 04-01:19:06
Cooks: Oh! Okay.
- 04-01:19:07
Wyatt: But it was real wall space, and May Sun was in it. We did it through the [Artist] *Project Series*. Danny Martinez, Pat Ward Williams did a project there. There were like a lot of people that—if you go onto the website, it's called *Artist Project Series*.
- 04-01:19:29
Cooks: And it was solo exhibitions, each person?
- 04-01:19:32
Wyatt: Solo exhibitions. Solo exhibitions, yeah. I was kind of like fresh off the Capitol [Records building] mural project that I did there, *Hollywood Jazz: [1945–1972]*, so I wanted to do something on Central Avenue. The connection was that my family grew up directly in that area, so what I did was I wanted to talk about that history. I made these pedestals, which were constructed out of old fencing and so part of [the old fencing] was faded and whatever. I had these boxes on top, which they were done in a mirror, and I would have images, photographic images that would pop out of that, some of the jazz artists from that period. On the back, there were images, photographs of my family during that period, yeah. So it related to that, and it had music from that period.
- 04-01:20:33
Cooks: Okay!
- 04-01:20:33
Wyatt: And I actually had a couple of big canvases that hung down from the ceiling, and I had scaffolding there, so I would work from time to time during the run of the show, on the mural. Yeah, it was part performance and part installation, but it was good. For the reception, some of the musicians from that time period actually performed, and they enjoyed it. It was a huge—
- 04-01:21:00
Cooks: That's great!

- 04-01:21:01
Wyatt: It was a big deal, yeah.
- 04-01:21:02
Cooks: Wow.
- 04-01:21:03
Wyatt: And it was nice, too, because I could do an installation and something a little more conceptual, you know? But it was nice to do that. It was a nice space, really.
- 04-01:21:15
Cooks: When I looked at the pictures, it looked really different from other things that I've seen you do.
- 04-01:21:18
Wyatt: Oh yeah, it was.
- 04-01:21:22
Cooks: Okay. And sticking with the gallery exhibitions that I have here—and May Sun, again, 1994, for the *LAX: Los Angeles Biennial*.
- 04-01:21:34
Wyatt: Right. Yeah, that was at the Armory [Center for the Arts] in Pasadena. And it was me and May, and it was like kind of collaborative. [The exhibition was *Collaborations: Inside the Amory/Out on the Street*.] It focused on public works, you know, works that we've worked on, but it also focused on the idea of collaborative work, as well. And May and I did our piece. I think Danny Martinez and Renée Petropoulos, they had a room. We each had a space within that—
- 04-01:22:09
Cooks: Biennial, it was.
- 04-01:22:10
Wyatt: Yeah, right.
- 04-01:22:11
Cooks: Yeah, at the Armory, okay.
- 04-01:22:12
Wyatt: Yeah. And so what we did was, May used this guitar she found. She was part of the clean-up during the riots, the '92 rebellion, so she found this old burned-up guitar, which she hung from the ceiling, and it had these wires kind of coming from that along the wall. And then there was a space where they kept armory—it's a real armory room—so we went to this prop place and rented all these army props and everything. And I had these little boxes. And on one side we had images from the '92 rebellion, and it had Rodney King, and kind of like the spark that lit the flame. And on the other side it was Marquette Frye, who was the reason why '65 happened, on either side of the wall. And in

the middle, when you walked in the space, there was this old armory crate with a bazooka, a prop bazooka pointing out directly at you.

04-01:23:18

Cooks: Wow.

04-01:23:20

Wyatt: Yeah. Because the whole idea of the armory, it was perfect, because that's what the space was used for, it was an armory, and so we tapped into that. And we tapped into the rebellion in '92, and the one in '65, too. And contemporary, too, because like I say, May used found objects from the clean-up that she found there.

04-01:23:44

Cooks: Yeah, that's terrific.

04-01:23:45

Wyatt: There's a catalog on that, too.

04-01:23:46

Cooks: Okay. Wow, okay, that's great. So now, I'll go back to some of the outdoor murals. So we have talked—because it's been so important, and it has had a second life—about the *Hollywood Jazz*—

04-01:24:06

Wyatt: Mural, oh yeah.

04-01:24:06

Cooks: —mural, okay. So we know how it came about, which is great. I'm just going to say 1990 to '91, twenty-six feet by eighty-eight feet, enormous. Well, there's a couple of stories. One you told off-camera, about someone that helped you when you were working on the mural. I mean, you're right there at Capitol Records, so all of these amazing musicians are coming in and out, but somebody stopped to see what you were doing and asked—

04-01:24:42

Wyatt: Oh, you're talking about—well, a lot of people would stop, I mean, I'd have a lot of people. There's two different stories. The second time I did it, it was ceramic, and there was no interaction on it. I did it off-site, and it was just installed, you know? But the first time I painted it was when I had the most interaction with people. At one point in time, I was working on Gerry Mulligan. I was actually painting him, you know? And I was listening to Gerry Mulligan, because a lot of times I'll listen to the artist that I'm working on. And he pulled up, him and his wife pulled up. And they were just the nicest, nicest people. And after that, we kept in contact until he passed away.

04-01:25:29

Cooks: Wow!

04-01:25:29

Wyatt:

Yeah, but they were really nice. He said, "This is like such a surprise. We weren't even going to take this route. It's a surprise to see." He was on his way to a rehearsal for the Playboy Jazz Festival, and he just happened to see it, and we talked and took pictures. So yeah, it was good. I've got all that stuff, too, so whatever you need, I've got pictures of it. [laughs]

04-01:25:50

Cooks:

Oh, incredible. And then someone else. You said that Bonnie Raitt was there?

04-01:25:58

Wyatt:

Yeah. And there's so many people. Like I've met Nat King Cole's daughters, his sister. Natalie Cole came to the reception. But anyway, this one day I was just out painting, and one of the A&R [artists and repertoire] men—I'm not sure, but I think that [Bonnie Raitt] was a part of Capitol somehow or she knew the A&R person there—and he came out and says, "Hey, I want you to meet so-and-so." And I meet her, and I knew who it was. I say, "Oh man, this is like a real pleasure." "I Can't Make You Love [Me]," I mean, that's like a song, man, you know? [laughs]

04-01:26:35

Cooks:

I know, I know.

04-01:26:36

Wyatt:

And I was working and were talking, and she said, "Oh, can I watch?" And I said, "Well, come up. You can paint." And so I showed her what to do, because up close, it was just almost like a series of dots. Because when you step back, that's when it all focuses and comes together. But as you get closer and closer on it, it's really more abstract, because of the way that I want the viewer to view it. So there's like two treats: one for the person that's just passing by seeing it; and then the one who's really taking time to look at it, there's a lot of stuff going on. So she painted, and we painted for a while. And she's a really interesting person. She hung around a lot of musicians earlier, and she mentioned a lot of the blues musicians that she knew. But she was really just a sweetheart, really, and I got a picture of her, too. [laughs] She was really cool.

04-01:27:33

Cooks:

Amazing. Just incredible.

04-01:27:33

Wyatt:

Really nice. And she got those three Grammys this year, which is really well deserved, well deserved.

04-01:27:39

Cooks:

Yes! Yeah, just this weekend.

04-01:27:42

Wyatt:

And so deserved, you know? Yeah.

- 04-01:27:44
Cooks: Oh, that's so exciting. I mean, it's such a visible space, and I know it was on the south-facing wall, and that's why you had to redo it.
- 04-01:27:56
Wyatt: Right, because it was bad. Between being south facing and the UV rays, it just tore it up. And I had a pretty heavy-duty coating on it, but it just burned away. I say, "Well, I'm not going to redo it the same way, because that was a different time in my life." He says, "Well, do it in tile." And that's what we did, yeah.
- 04-01:28:16
Cooks: Do you usually work with painted murals, with Nova Color, in Culver City?
- 04-01:28:23
Wyatt: Yeah. That's the main place I use, Nova Color.
- 04-01:28:29
Cooks: Okay, I wondered that, or if you had some other source.
- 04-01:28:32
Wyatt: No, no, Nova Color. In fact, I told all my students, even at Irvine, "This is the place to get your—"
- 04-01:28:36
Cooks: Really?
- 04-01:28:37
Wyatt: "—materials if you want to learn painting." That's when I had them work with the fiberglass screen, and I said, "While you're down there, you just pick up some fiberglass screen, too." I told them all the gels to get, because it's really cheap, and it has really nice texture to it. Yeah, really viscous.
- 04-01:28:55
Cooks: Okay, [to Amanda] were you going to ask something?
- 04-01:28:59
Tewes: No, go ahead.
- 04-01:28:59
Cooks: I was going to ask what the tile company—I was just doing some research, and I wondered if it was Urban Clay? Or is there a company, a manufacturer that you worked with?
- 04-01:29:11
Wyatt: You mean my glazes? No, the tile that I used on it was a place—and I'm so glad I found this place. It's called Longust. Longust. And they sell different variations of tiles, but specifically, they had this porcelain ceramic tile that I wanted, because it held up good on firings, and the tone of the tile was great for using glazes on top of it when they were firing, because it really caused the colors to punch a lot more. And the glazes that I got were Laguna Clay [and

Glaze Company], and they're off Seventh [Ave.] and the 60 Freeway in the City of Industry. And they just have everything that—

04-01:30:00

Cooks: That's the name I really know.

04-01:30:00

Wyatt: Yeah—

04-01:30:01

Cooks: Yeah, for clay/ceramic classes and all.

04-01:30:03

Wyatt: Exactly, yeah.

04-01:30:07

Cooks: I wanted to talk about your Spike Lee mural, [*Spike Lee Project*], which is no longer there, on Melrose [Ave.]

04-01:30:16

Wyatt: Yeah, that came as a result of doing the *Do the Right Thing* poster. [laughs] I remember we specifically met Downtown, because he wanted to do a store. He asked the architects with RAW [International] architecture, you know, all those guys, Roland Wiley. And they've been around for a long time. In fact, they did some nuts and bolts with the Union Station project, too, because they've been around a long, long time, and I've worked with them off and on during that period a lot. I did a few things with them. But they did that. And a woman named Lisa Comfort did the interior design for the store. The PR was done by—oh, what's her name, passed away. She was a PR person. And the store was run by Taylor Daniels, who—

04-01:31:05

Cooks: Okay. And this was Spike Lee's store. This is when we were buying all kinds of clothes.

04-01:31:10

Wyatt: Yeah, Spike Lee, yeah.

04-01:31:13

Cooks: And memorabilia.

04-01:31:14

Wyatt: Spike Lee's Joint.

04-01:31:15

Cooks: That's right.

04-01:31:16

Wyatt: And it was right across the street from Georgia restaurant, which was Denzel Washington's restaurant.

- 04-01:31:21
Cooks: I remember that, yes!
- 04-01:31:23
Wyatt: So that place was really popping! It was like a hot spot. And what happened is that we met Downtown LA to go over it, and I had to present it to Spike. He was like in the worst mood ever, because he had just found out that, I think—what was the soundtrack didn't get nominated for an Oscar or something like that. It was the soundtrack to—
- 04-01:31:52
Cooks: Mo' Better Blues?
- 04-01:31:54
Wyatt: No, *Jungle Fever*.
- 04-01:31:55
Cooks: Oh okay.
- 04-01:31:56
Wyatt: Specifically because Stevie Wonder did the soundtrack.
- 04-01:31:58
Cooks: Yes, yes.
- 04-01:32:00
Wyatt: And he was like just livid. And I said [to the art director], "Man, I've got to do a presentation to the art director, [Art Sims]. I've got to do this *now*?" [laughs] But the first time he saw it, that was the first time he smiled the whole day. He loved it, because initially it just has the mule with a sign, forty acres and a mule. And he says, "Man, why don't you have the mule kicking the sign?" And that was a really good idea, so I said, "Yeah, okay." And he loved it, and I painted it, and he came up [to the top of the building from time to time to observe the process of me painting the mural]. And so he loved it, he absolutely loved it.
- 04-01:32:29
Cooks: That's awesome.
- 04-01:32:31
Wyatt: Because they put it on t-shirts and billboards, it was on everything. And he loved it, and his book that came out in 2021, his book *Spike*, and it deals with all the projects that—film projects he worked on. He used my mural in the book, too, you know?
- 04-01:32:51
Cooks: Oh great!
- 04-01:32:51
Wyatt: Yeah.

- 04-01:32:52
Cooks: Great.
- 04-01:32:53
Wyatt: Yeah. So that was cool. It was a nice tribute.
- 04-01:32:56
Cooks: And that's your old neighborhood. It's right by Fairfax High School.
- 04-01:32:58
Wyatt: Yeah, right up the street. Right on Melrose [Ave.], yeah.
- 04-01:33:00
Cooks: Oh, how fun!
- 04-01:33:01
Wyatt: It's like if I were away for a while and came back, I would hardly recognize Melrose now. Because it was just plain—it just had a movie—not a movie, but a theater there, you know, for stage. It was called the Zephyr Theatre or something like that. And then they had the record store right across the street, you know? But it really wasn't a lot to do there. There really wasn't a lot to do, period. Most of the best times were like the parties. [laughs] The parties were great.
- 04-01:33:32
Cooks: But now it's a lot of shopping. It's about stores and retail.
- 04-01:33:35
Wyatt: Yeah, it really is. You're right, restaurants.
- 04-01:33:41
Cooks: So something else I'm going to point out, because it's outside of Los Angeles, is in Wilberforce, Ohio.
- 04-01:33:51
Wyatt: Right!
- 04-01:33:50
Cooks: The National Afro-American Museum [and Cultural Center] commission.
- 04-01:33:54
Wyatt: Yeah, they bought like about, I think, a couple of pieces that I had.
- 04-01:34:01
Cooks: Oh okay.
- 04-01:34:00
Wyatt: Yeah. And that was cool, that was a really nice thing.
- 04-01:34:09
Cooks: Did you do a mural for them, as well?

- 04-01:34:10
Wyatt: No, no.
- 04-01:34:11
Cooks: They just bought your work? That's great.
- 04-01:34:12
Wyatt: Yeah, they just bought my work, right.
- 04-01:34:14
Cooks: Great.
- 04-01:34:14
Wyatt: No, I did do other commission work for Hampton University.
- 04-01:34:20
Cooks: Oh, really?
- 04-01:34:21
Wyatt: Yeah, Hampton University in [Hampton, Virginia]. That's in my résumé, too. I forget the year. I think it was around '92.
- 04-01:34:26
Tewes: Nineteen ninety-three, I think.
- 04-01:34:27
Wyatt: Nineteen—what was it?
- 04-01:34:28
Tewes: Nineteen ninety-three.
- 04-01:34:29
Wyatt: Yeah, exactly. And what happened is that they commissioned me to do—John Biggers actually recommended me for this project, and they commissioned me to do a piece of the president.
- 04-01:34:42
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-01:34:44
Wyatt: And so I did a portrait of the president, and worked from a series of pictures and composed it. And they loved it. And so they opened a new library, and they wanted me to do one of the president and his wife for that one, so I've got two commissioned portraits there.
- 04-01:35:00
Cooks: So two, wow!
- 04-01:35:02
Wyatt: Yeah. And the one of he and his wife went in the library after that at Hampton University.

- 04-01:35:08
Cooks: And was the first project you did, the picture of the president, was that a drawing?
- 04-01:35:13
Wyatt: No, it was a painting. They were both paintings.
- 04-01:35:15
Cooks: They were both paintings.
- 04-01:35:15
Wyatt: Yeah, oil on canvas.
- 04-01:35:17
Cooks: And they're both oil, okay. Yeah, and Biggers is the one that orchestrated that.
- 04-01:35:24
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 04-01:35:25
Cooks: Okay, let's see. We should talk about *People Coming, People Going*, because we've mentioned Union Station and *City of Dreams, River of History*. And you were working on this one simultaneously.
- 04-01:35:41
Wyatt: Yeah, with Union Station.
- 04-01:35:45
Cooks: Was that also with May Sun?
- 04-01:35:46
Wyatt: No, no, that one wasn't with May. [I'm speaking about *People Coming, People Going*. But the Union Station *City of Dreams, River of History* was with May.]
- 04-01:35:47
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-01:35:48
Wyatt: May had her own station. I think May's station was on Vermont and Western, I think, or Western and—
- 04-01:35:55
Cooks: Wilshire maybe?
- 04-01:35:57
Wyatt: No, Western and Hollywood Blvd. I'm not sure, but you can look it up. You can find it.
- 04-01:36:04
Cooks: Yeah.

04-01:36:04

Wyatt:

But anyway, that was a project that I got the help from Stan Wilson on, in terms of using tile and doing all that firing and learning the process. But *People Coming, People Going*, it's pretty simple, straightforward. Essentially what happens at a place with transportation. [laughs] You've got people going someplace and from another place. So on one side you have about six figures looking at you, and then when you come from the other direction, on the other side, there's people going. And I used Bill Pajaud in that piece, yeah.

04-01:36:41

Cooks:

Wow.

04-01:36:42

Wyatt:

Yeah. And his back is to you. And then I had another friend of mine, the woman, Jean Riggins, that I mentioned, I used her son, because he had a hi-top fade, you know, like Kid 'n Play. And one of the things that they said, "Well, what about this hair style?" I said, "Well, it won't matter, because twenty years from now, it'll be back in style, you know, and seen again." [laughs] Yeah.

04-01:37:02

Cooks:

Yeah, that's right. That's so cool.

04-01:37:04

Wyatt:

And so that was *People Going*. And I used the Wiltern [Theater] in the background. I used architectural sites from around the district with—

04-01:37:12

Cooks:

In Koreatown, yeah.

04-01:37:13

Wyatt:

Yeah, responding to that space.

04-01:37:15

Cooks:

And the Wiltern is on the right side, the far right side. Yes.

04-01:37:18

Wyatt:

Right, right. And it's in the background of the *People Going*, too, yeah.

04-01:37:23

Cooks:

Okay.

04-01:37:25

Wyatt:

Just another angle.

04-01:37:24

Cooks:

Now, with *City of Dreams, River of History*, I read that your grandmother—

04-01:37:31

Wyatt:

Yes.

04-01:37:32

Cooks: Can we talk about some of the notable models in that?

04-01:37:35

Wyatt: Yeah, the young lady in the foreground was actually a young woman—girl at that time; she's a young woman now, I'm sure. She's maybe in her thirties or something, now, but at the time, she was in elementary school. When I did the piece in Montebello, because I told them how I work, and I want to use people from the community, so the police department arranged for me to take pictures at a certain school. And she was perfect. It was just something about the way she looked, and she was like perfect. She was just this little kid, but just her skin tone, everything, was like perfect for what I wanted to do. So I used her in the foreground. And then like I say, I've got my grandmother in the back. She's with the blue on. On the far right is my cousin. He lives in Orange. And on the far left is my cousin-in-law, and his name is Shawn. He was married to my cousin who passed away a few years ago. And then in between that, I have a couple of kids, Asian kids that my daughters went to school with; I have them in it. And I also have images of some of the older, like the Gabrieleño Indians, images from there. And also because it was Chinatown, and it was central to that site, because that site was basically on the original site, which was Chinatown. In fact, when they dug up and excavated the earth in that area, they actually found artifacts from Chinatown. And this lady was smart enough to save them and gave them to May, and May used them in the riverbed that you see in there. So if you look in that riverbed, a lot of those objects are from what they excavated. [laughs]

04-01:39:34

Cooks: Just incredible!

04-01:39:35

Wyatt: If you look close, there's somebody's dentures in there, too. [laughs] Yeah.

04-01:39:39

Cooks: Okay, wow.

04-01:39:40

Wyatt: Yeah. So that was it, that was for that. And I used some of the symbols on the edge of that, because I wanted to create the illusion that the actual stone there was three-dimensionally broken up enough to where it's like you're looking through the actual building. And along that, I used some of May's symbols in there that she used on the floor, on the pavement pattern, and we just made it all connect, you know? It was quite a project, you know? A lot of—

04-01:40:12

Cooks: It really is.

04-01:40:12

Wyatt: A lot of thought went into it, and we actually got it done. Phew, it was great.

- 04-01:40:20
Cooks: The fish tank that's there is a big draw.
- 04-01:40:22
Wyatt: Oh yeah, oh yeah.
- 04-01:40:23
Cooks: For kids and adults. We saw some garibaldi [Catalina goldfish] sitting in there, and some of the kelp.
- 04-01:40:31
Wyatt: That was actually constructed by this guy—I forget his name, but he actually did work for SeaWorld. He did tanks all over. [Cooks laughs] But SeaWorld was one of the major tanks, and he also did work for, I think it was Osaka, Japan aquarium. So he was well known, and we got him. And that was great, so we got like really good people. That's one thing we do, we try to use the best people we can for fabrication beyond our knowledge.
- 04-01:41:07
Cooks: Okay, I'm having to pick and choose. There are a couple of other shows that I'll ask you about. An exhibition that was at the Corpus Christi Museum in Texas, [Art Museum of South Texas]. And these are drawings and paintings?
- 04-01:41:30
Wyatt: [I had one painting in that show, entitled *The Survivor*. The exhibition, *Representing LA*, opened at the Frye Art Museum in Seattle, Washington. Then it traveled to Corpus Christi Art Museum in Corpus Christi, Texas.]
- 04-01:41:39
Cooks: Okay, if there was a brochure, we can find it and—
- 04-01:41:44
Wyatt: Yeah. [There is a catalog.]
- 04-01:41:56
Cooks: I don't have it here.
- 04-01:41:57
Wyatt: Linda—[sorry, wrong name, wrong show.]
- 04-01:41:58
Cooks: Two thousand and one, 2002.
- 04-01:42:01
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 04-01:42:02
Cooks: We'll find it.
- 04-01:42:03
Wyatt: Yeah.

04-01:42:03

Cooks: Okay.

04-01:42:04

Wyatt: Oh, wait a minute, Corpus Christi. I'm thinking because I did one in Arizona.

04-01:42:15

Cooks: Yes.

04-01:42:17

Wyatt: That's the one I did. The other one in Arizona, that was the one I had the one—so the one in Corpus Christi, it's part of a traveling exhibition called *Representing LA*, and that started initially in Seattle, I think, in Seattle, Washington.

04-01:42:37

Cooks: So I have *Representing LA*: [Pictorial Currents in Southern California Art], Seattle, at the Frye Art Museum.

04-01:42:42

Wyatt: Right! That's it, Frye Art Museum.

04-01:42:43

Cooks: And then that traveled to Corpus Christi?

04-01:42:44

Wyatt: Yeah, it traveled to Corpus Christi.

04-01:42:45

Cooks: Got it.

04-01:42:47

Wyatt: It's in my résumé, for sure, if you look on my site.

04-01:42:52

Cooks: Okay. I also found an article from 1999 [Marcos Sanchez, "Muralists Convene in Los Angeles," *El Andar*] that talked about a group of muralists in Los Angeles meeting together to talk about mural restoration work and wanting first right of refusal for restoring murals. Do you remember being part of this meeting? It was with Judy Baca.

04-01:43:24

Wyatt: What year was it?

04-01:43:24

Cooks: I have this noted as 1999, and I was wondering if that led to the Mural Conservancy of LA, or if you were involved with the Mural Conservancy?

04-01:43:35

Wyatt: No, I really wasn't involved with them. I have worked with them before, but I really wasn't that involved with them.

- 04-01:43:41
Cooks: Okay, okay!
- 04-01:43:42
Wyatt: Yeah, I was more involved with Judy's program.
- 04-01:43:44
Cooks: With SPARC.
- 04-01:43:45
Wyatt: Yeah.
- 04-01:43:45
Cooks: And I should say for the record, SPARC stands for Social Public Art Resource Center.
- 04-01:43:49
Wyatt: Right, exactly.
- 04-01:43:51
Cooks: Yeah, okay. All right. There's a couple of other things that I'll mention. So I know you were selected for the Venice Biennale in 2015, and that was—
- 04-01:44:07
Wyatt: That was the biggest heartbreak, man!
- 04-01:44:09
Cooks: What happened?
- 04-01:44:11
Wyatt: Oh man, they had a great reception and everything. I mean, it was great. It was like everybody who was in LA and a part of [the arts] was there.
- 04-01:44:30
Cooks: Well, who organized it?
- 04-01:44:32
Wyatt: It was organized by Lyn Kienholz, who was—
- 04-01:44:34
Cooks: Yes, Ed Kienholz's wife.
- 04-01:44:37
Wyatt: Ed Kienholz's wife.
- 04-01:44:38
Cooks: Yes, first wife.
- 04-01:44:39
Wyatt: Yeah. And she was really cool. But the curator they selected was Jill Moniz, okay? And from what I understand, I think they didn't get along that well.

- 04-01:44:51
Cooks: Okay. So it was *going* to happen.
- 04-01:44:54
Wyatt: Or maybe different visions, I don't know. But it didn't happen. I don't think they had the place secured, the site. They were working on it, and it was heartbreaking, because they had a lot of people, it was going to be a really good show.
- 04-01:45:14
Cooks: Oh okay. Well, you never know.
- 04-01:45:19
Wyatt: Well yeah, that's right.
- 04-01:45:19
Cooks: You never know what might happen in the future.
- 04-01:45:22
Wyatt: But I put that down, because I wanted to make note of that, that it actually happened; it just didn't go through, it got postponed.
- 04-01:45:35
Cooks: Right, okay.
- 04-01:45:35
Wyatt: But it was such an important thing.
- 04-01:45:38
Cooks: Right! And a huge look at Los Angeles, Black LA.
- 04-01:45:42
Wyatt: Oh yeah.
- 04-01:45:43
Cooks: Okay. There's a number of exhibitions that you were in, and I'm not going to name them all, but out-of-state and in-state: North Carolina, at two different spaces; the Kansas African American Museum; Naples Museum of Art; Muskegon—
- 04-01:46:07
Wyatt: Muskegon. [It is in Muskegon, Michigan.]
- 04-01:46:07
Cooks: Sorry, Muskegon Museum of Art in Michigan.
- 04-01:46:10
Wyatt: Yeah, that's connected to the Mott-Warsh.
- 04-01:46:13
Cooks: Okay, that's the Mott-Warsh Collection, right! And in many of these, your work is featured as part of a larger group show.

- 04-01:46:21
Wyatt: Right.
- 04-01:46:23
Cooks: It seems like that's one of the main ways that people out of the area here have gotten to see your work.
- 04-01:46:30
Wyatt: Yeah, it really is. It's been great, because people contact me about stuff, and, you know, because like I say, I do focus on the work.
- 04-01:46:42
Cooks: Right.
- 04-01:46:43
Wyatt: How it falls out is up to the people who interpret it and collect.
- 04-01:46:47
Cooks: And it's—
- 04-01:46:47
Wyatt: I just do the work.
- 04-01:46:49
Cooks: And it's millions of people, though. I mean, you know, your reach is bigger than anyone's.
- 04-01:46:56
Wyatt: Yeah—
- 04-01:46:57
Cooks: Just by the nature of the work that you do as public art. It's a totally different scale, different kind of conversation to have with you.
- 04-01:47:06
Wyatt: Right, yeah.
- 04-01:47:10
Cooks: We've talked a bit about *Life Model: [Charles White and His Students]* and the significance of that, and thinking about mentorship and giving you a chance to talk more about—which you've done already—talked about Charles White and his incredible influence.
- 04-01:47:28
You had an exhibition last year at Steve Turner Gallery, *Loss Healing & Restoration*. And I would like to hear you—
- 04-01:47:37
Wyatt: Solo exhibition.
- 04-01:47:37
Cooks: Yes, it was a solo exhibition. I'd love for you to talk about that one.

04-01:47:42

Wyatt:

Yeah, the first exhibition I had with Steve—and he's a pleasure to work with, too, by the way, because we both are big time Lakers fans, and we talk about everything under the sun, you know, as well as art, so that's always cool. His wife is lovely and she's a really good person, too. In 2005, I had a show with him when he was in Beverly Hills, and it worked out pretty well. It worked out really well, and he got to know my work, and he's really supportive of it. And he says, "Man, I'd love to do another show now." I said, "Yeah, that sounds good. It's about time." And this is like 2022, last year, 2022. And so what I came up with, because of the work that I was working on and what we had gone through with the pandemic and all, and the show was called *Loss, Healing & Restoration*. The images that I use in there were family members, like my dad, my wife, my daughter, youngest daughter. And I had a piece in there with Kobe [Bryant] that it went like [snaps fingers] that, man.

04-01:48:53

Cooks:

I'm sure.

04-01:48:55

Wyatt:

Yeah. And because people really like that piece. But that was all a part of that, as well, too, because it was just that period of time when I was creating all this work that sort of fostered that. And it wasn't that many pieces. This is about maybe eight, nine pieces, large scale. The biggest one was the one of my dad, and then the rest of the pieces were smaller, you know? My wife and Kobe were about the same size.

04-01:49:23

Cooks:

Now, Kobe was gone by then?

04-01:49:25

Wyatt:

Yeah.

04-01:49:27

Cooks:

But did you draw that earlier, or after he passed?

04-01:49:29

Wyatt:

No, I drew it after he passed, yeah.

04-01:49:32

Cooks:

Okay. Did you ever meet him?

04-01:49:34

Wyatt:

No, I never met Kobe. No, I never did. Although, I was interviewed with this guy working on the film on Kobe, and he actually took quite a few shots and everything. He actually caught me in the process of drawing the Kobe piece. So that's pretty interesting, because this guy's a young filmmaker, [Patrick Green], and he's doing some pretty good stuff, so I can't wait for that to come out.

04-01:50:05

Cooks:

Wow, okay. You know, one of the things—I think we talked about it off-camera, because we went to see it yesterday—but the *Ripple of Hope*, Robert F. Kennedy [Inspiration Park]. You know, it's not a mural, it's an installation, it's public art. It's something you did with the great May Sun. We were wondering about—well, I had a couple of technical questions. One is, the image of Robert Kennedy you made on granite, and so that's a medium we haven't talked about yet.

04-01:50:50

Wyatt:

Right. When we did that project—I'll give you the history of it—we were asked to participate in the proposal stage of this project by Michelle Isenberg, who May and I both worked with, and María de Herrera, who they were working together on this project. Several artists were invited to present proposals and concepts, and we won. And so we further developed our concept, and they loved it, and then we presented it. Like I say, we had a meeting where we presented to all of the people, the main people involved in the project, as well as members of the Kennedy family: his son, Max; and his wife, Vicki. Once we explained the concept and what we wanted to do and all, once it was over, Max Kennedy stood up and clapped and said, "This is stunning, it's stunning." And so we were, you know, feeling good about it, because if he liked it, it was good. Because he was the first [family] member, I think, to come back to that space since Robert Kennedy was assassinated.

04-01:52:07

Cooks:

Oh wow. And the Ambassador Hotel, which was there on Wilshire, was just empty and in disrepair for most of—I'll say *our* lives, because—

04-01:52:20

Wyatt:

Yeah, it was. I mean, they used it like for some film locations, but by and large, it was just totally just a vacant [lot]. And it was a good idea to make it into something that would, in a sense, redeem, to a certain extent, the Robert Kennedy assassination, to turn it into something that would be more meaningful, a different phase in that whole period of time.

04-01:52:50

Cooks:

You showed us a picture of you and May and Dolores Huerta at the groundbreaking!

04-01:52:59

Wyatt:

Yes, yes.

04-01:53:01

Cooks:

And Dolores Huerta has a quotation that's part of [the installation]. Could you talk a little bit about the quotations or who you chose?

04-01:53:12

Wyatt:

Well, most of those quotations were based on people that Robert Kennedy admired, so the core of them were. There may be a few that we added in there, but I would say that the larger percentage of quotes that we used were based

on people that inspired him, quotes of people that, where he gained inspiration, too. Don't ask me to quote. I can't remember all of them.

04-01:53:40

Cooks: No, not at all, it was just—

04-01:53:42

Wyatt: I would have to see them.

04-01:53:43

Cooks: It was just that you have that quotation from him, and then there are names of other very powerful people, so that was helpful.

04-01:53:49

Wyatt: Right, oh yeah.

04-01:53:50

Cooks: Just to put him in conversation.

04-01:53:54

Wyatt: Yeah. But [Dolores Huerta] was really, you're talking about a—her life, she is truly a—

04-01:54:00

Cooks: Oh my goodness!

04-01:54:00

Wyatt: A warrior for social justice. I mean, you think about some of the stuff that she went through with the [United] Farm Workers union. I mean, like she was up north, and I think she got beat by the police, and she was hospitalized. She's gone through a lot. She received an award from President Obama, because she's just a delightful woman. She has a huge family, daughters and a son, you know?

04-01:54:26

Cooks: And a survivor of so much, just life and death. You know, life on the line.

04-01:54:30

Wyatt: Oh yeah.

04-01:54:34

Cooks: Okay. So we're winding down.

04-01:54:38

Wyatt: All right. [laughs]

04-01:54:41

Cooks: And this is a series of questions that are just about your reflections. Do you think about your work in terms of an evolution? You know, it's funny to ask this question, because you started off with the bar so high. You know, you're barely in double digits with your age, and you had surpassed most artists who were adults, in terms of skill. But do you think about your career, the

evolution of your work from then until now—or how might you, if it makes sense to even think about that trajectory?

04-01:55:34

Wyatt:

You know, it's really funny. I mean, there are a lot of artists that do, that are really conscious of that. I'm not one of those artists. I just really want to do the best work I can possibly do at any given stage in my life. As long as it comes across as true and honest, whether—like I say, I could shoot for the moon, and it may land at the top of the trees. I wanted to give it my full effort, and I want to do the best work that I can possibly do, because I've always felt that it's a gift, and I want to treat it like that. It's like an obligation to use it to the fullest, and not to shortchange any part of that, you know, of that gift, so it's like a major responsibility. But no, I don't. But it's just amazing to me how one thing or one project or one show or one image leads to another. It's just like it's meant to be. That's the best way to explain it, you know? And that's the way I treat it. I mean, it's out of my hands. [laughs]

z04-01:56:47

Cooks:

Right, right, and things—people come to you.

04-01:56:48

Wyatt:

It's part of a greater—yeah.

04-01:56:50

Cooks:

Yeah. Do you—

04-01:56:52

Wyatt:

And there's been times during that whole process that it's been tough. I couldn't *buy* a commission, you know? But you don't really remember those times, you remember kind of the good times, you know?

04-01:57:07

Cooks:

I guess, do you think more about doing gallery shows now versus murals? Or do you enjoy one over the other, maybe at this time in your life? Do you think about them differently?

04-01:57:25

Wyatt:

Yeah, you're exactly right. Right now, I'm at a stage in my life where I'm doing more gallery-oriented things. Because I mean, like I say, I'm sixty-seven, and I don't climb scaffolding anymore. [laughs] And even installation work is still a tremendous amount of time, and I really want to spend the rest of my time really focusing on doing kind of special pieces, you know, pieces that are more gallery and museum oriented. So yeah.

04-01:57:56

Cooks:

Do you think about—or maybe you still are writing songs?

04-01:58:00

Wyatt:

No, you know what, it's like I still hear beats and everything like that, and still, like every once in a while, I'll put something down.

04-01:58:08

Cooks: Yeah!

04-01:58:08

Wyatt: But it's like a different generation now, you know? Like I say, when I came up, it was Stevie Wonder and that whole thing, and the people I worked with in the eighties and in the nineties. It's like just a whole 'nother generation and mindset. A lot of it is really good, some of it, but that's just with anything else, you know? It's a different generation's time now, but that's where I was at.

04-01:58:39

Cooks: But then Nas—

04-01:58:40

Wyatt: But I still have a great appreciation of it, you know?

04-01:58:42

Cooks: And they have an appreciation for you, with Nas sampling your work! I mean—

04-01:58:47

Wyatt: Yeah. We were real, real thrilled about that, because—and me personally, because I love Nas, and I love Mary J. Blige, too.

04-01:58:54

Cooks: Yes!

04-01:58:54

Wyatt: And for her to sing those hooks, and she just nailed them! You know, and for Nas to put his concept on top of a sample—so he's relating to our music.

04-01:59:07

Cooks: It's incredible.

04-01:59:08

Wyatt: Yeah, it's like an honor, you know?

04-01:59:11

Cooks: Right.

04-01:59:11

Wyatt: Yeah, because I like his work a lot. That *Illmatic* album was really—by far, it was so groundbreaking, you know?

04-01:59:19

Cooks: Right, for so many people.

04-01:59:21

Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah.

04-01:59:22

Cooks: Right, okay. Do you feel like there's a greater interest in your gallery work now than there has been ever before?

04-01:59:35

Wyatt: Yeah, I do. The way it's happened it's kind of like slowly crept up on me. [laughs] It's just from the people that are collecting my work, to the shows that I've been in. You know, the interest [in] just say the auctions alone. I never experienced that, you know?

04-02:00:02

Cooks: I mean, some people, I would think, are repeat collectors. You know, they have your [work]. But I also think about a new generation of collectors—

04-02:00:15

Wyatt: Right, yeah.

04-02:00:15

Cooks: —who are tuning in and catching up to you, and what you've been doing all along.

04-02:00:21

Wyatt: Yeah.

04-02:00:21

Cooks: That's really exciting.

04-02:00:22

Wyatt: Well, and that's greatly appreciated if they are, because that's another generation of collectors. [laughs] Like I say, I just try to be as honest as I can with the work that I do, and with my creative process and with the statements that I make in the work. And hopefully it resonates to generations beyond, you know? Like Charlie's work does, David's, just certain pieces, works, people's works that speak to other generations, yeah.

04-02:00:58

Cooks: So I have said, even before, that your work is part of my Los Angeles. I was born in Hollywood, I grew up in this neighborhood. But I wonder if you could describe—this might not be a fair question, and you don't have to answer it—but if you could describe the city as someone who has really helped to make it. Like you created experiences for millions of people through your work. It's an epic contribution, you know? And I think about you in all these different places around the city, contributing, learning, benefiting, giving back, you know, all of that. I wonder if you ever think about it that way, like LA is your city, in a way that nobody else can claim.

04-02:01:57

Wyatt: Yeah, I've been told that quite a bit. But to be honest with you, like I say, it keeps going back to the same thing: I just want to do the best work that I

possibly can do in any given moment, in any given time. And I'm sorry to be redundant.

04-02:02:15

Cooks: No.

04-02:02:16

Wyatt: But that's basically it. And you know, when I received the Capitol Records project, I said, "This is going to be the best project I ever do." You know, when I received the Union Station [project], "This is going to be the best project I ever [do]." It doesn't matter where it's going to be. That's why I did Spike's project. When I did the movie poster thing, I said, "This is going to be the best movie poster I ever do! It may be the only movie poster I ever do, but—"

04-02:02:39

Cooks: Incredible.

04-02:02:39

Wyatt: I always just wanted to do really, really good work, and I was always excited about the challenge that every new project had, in terms of very unique challenges, you know, like sunlight or contractual things, problems with materials, all those kind of things. Like when you work with tile, that's extremely—oh man, you talk about labor intensive, because you can have a great firing but the wrong colors.

04-02:03:15

Cooks: Right, it's not direct.

04-02:03:16

Wyatt: No, it's not. And then you can have a good firing, and then the tile cracks, you know? Oh man, it's frustrating. That's one thing that painting has over that, is that you can just—or drawing—you just do it, and you don't have to worry about that. But there are so many variables when you work. And so I have to say, back to what I said about each project having its own challenges, that's part of it. But it's also fun, too, because when I approach a new project, you know, especially in the public art murals, like I say, I want to do the best work that I could possibly do, but I'm also excited about getting it to a certain point where everybody says, "Oh yeah, I get it!" And then they see it, and then you see people taking pictures with it, and [it's] showing up in movies. And something like the Capitol Records [mural], that's been in so many movies. Union Station [mural], it's been in movies. It's just a lot of stuff, you know? I mean like *Rush Hour*, the Capitol [mural] was in that one, the first one. Just a lot of movies and films and everything.

04-02:04:26

Cooks: I would think music videos, too. People don't make those as much, I feel, as they used to.

- 04-02:04:31
Wyatt: No, but it was a part of a lot of—
- 04-02:04:31
Cooks: I'm sure!
- 04-02:04:34
Wyatt: —you know, like say commercials and—yeah, quite a few things.
- 04-02:04:39
Cooks: Do they have to ask, or should they?
- 04-02:04:41
Wyatt: Yeah, they have to ask permission, because I have a copyright, you know?
[laughs]
- 04-02:04:45
Cooks: That is so good!
- 04-02:04:47
Wyatt: Yeah. It's usually like three or four times a year, somebody who's going to be filming, and it depends. Like if it's for public TV, like PBS or something like that, then I don't charge. But if it's like Universal or Sony, they've got to pay.
[laughs]
- 04-02:05:11
Cooks: Yeah. And they expect to pay.
- 04-02:05:13
Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah, they do.
- 04-02:05:15
Cooks: Okay. So, Richard, are there any goals or dreams that you have as an artist left to be fulfilled?
- 04-02:05:24
Wyatt: Oh yeah, there's plenty.
- 04-02:05:25
Cooks: Really?
- 04-02:05:25
Wyatt: Yeah. Like you mentioned before now, I'm at the point where I want to do a lot more gallery/museum stuff, so that's the next challenge in my career, you know? [laughs]
- 04-02:05:37
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-02:05:38
Wyatt: Yeah. That's it.

04-02:05:42

Cooks: That's awesome. I wondered if you ever went back to Europe after you went when you were—

04-02:05:50

Wyatt: No, I didn't. In fact, I was talking to a buddy of mine who went with me, and we said hands down, all three of us, it was like the best, by far the best experience of our lives. We were all nineteen, before we got families and everything, and we just couldn't do it now, because it would be just too astronomically expensive, you know? And plus, we're a lot older now. We wouldn't do it the [same way], we certainly wouldn't backpack, that's for sure. [laughs] We'd stay at hotels and everything. But at that stage, though, it was just great. Getting to the Sistine Chapel early and laying down, looking at it, you know, that's great, stuff like that. Going to Venice and Rome and Paris, Spain, Amsterdam.

04-02:06:37

Cooks: You had talked about still wanting to go to some of the African countries.

04-02:06:41

Wyatt: Yeah, I would like to, because a lot of people talk—especially like Ghana. A lot of people, another—Todd Gray has a place over there.

04-02:06:50

Cooks: Yes!

04-02:06:52

Wyatt: And he and Kyungmi [Shin], they go there quite [often], yearly, I think they go there. And I was talking to another artist who was over there, went over there, a younger artist. April Bey was there.

04-02:07:06

Cooks: Okay, *oh!*

04-02:07:08

Wyatt: Yeah. And so she went over there, too. So there are so many people going over there, and I saw some of the pictures Todd had taken. I mean, it's beautiful man, yeah.

04-02:07:16

Cooks: Yes, he puts it in his work, too.

04-02:07:19

Wyatt: Yeah.

04-02:07:19

Cooks: And the work is beautiful.

04-02:07:21

Wyatt: Yeah, oh yeah, oh yeah.

04-02:07:22

Cooks: Yeah, do you collect other people's work?

04-02:07:25

Wyatt: You know what, I really don't. I used to trade a lot when I was younger. But a lot of times people come over and—when I was younger; I don't do it now—but I would like give away a lot of stuff. Like, for instance, La Monte Westmoreland, who has like—have you ever been to his house?

04-02:07:45

Cooks: No.

04-02:07:45

Wyatt: Yeah, he has like a huge collection of everything. He's got my work, everybody's work, you know?

04-02:07:50

Cooks: Really?

04-02:07:52

Wyatt: Yeah.

04-02:07:53

Cooks: Okay.

04-02:07:55

Wyatt: There are some artists that do collect a lot. I'm not one of them.

04-02:08:01

Cooks: Okay. Is there anything coming up that you want to talk about, or things that we didn't ask you that you want to make sure you say?

04-02:08:12

Wyatt: Not really. I'm just getting ready to start doing some more work. I've been on a drawing phase for the past couple of years, so I'm doing a lot of drawing. It's so intimate, you know? Mark making is fun! [laughs] Yeah. So just doing that, and that's basically it. Because they'll show someplace and someplace good. [laughs]

04-02:08:45

Cooks: And people are waiting for it. They really are.

04-02:08:46

Wyatt: Yeah.

04-02:08:48

Cooks: You have such a huge following and people who admire you and your work, even if they don't know who you are! That's the thing, with the music and the public work, it's just astounding.

04-02:09:01

Wyatt:

Yeah, I've been doing it for quite a while. But like I say, I haven't focused on [what] other artists, a lot of artists, have done: they just focus on, this is what I've done and so and so. And they're really organized, and it's great; it's just not me. I just try to really focus on my work. But like I say, I'm old enough now where I want to start thinking about that and start doing it. So that's like the next phase in, you know, really developing that more. [laughs]

04-02:09:33

Cooks:

Okay. Anything missing, Amanda? Or some other questions you have?

04-02:09:43

Tewes:

I could add on to, Richard, what you just said about the intimacy of drawing and moving that direction. Do you feel that this is just a stylistic thing you wanted to explore more, or is there some reality about just being older and, I don't want to be on the scaffolding as much anymore?

04-02:10:02

Wyatt:

Yeah. Actually, all that is true, but the main reason is that because so much of my career as an artist has been dedicated and devoted to doing these large-scale public art projects, and a lot of which I'm hands off. For instance, like in the Robert Kennedy Inspiration Park—that's what we call it, Inspiration Park—in that piece, you know, I don't know anything about granite and photographic images on granite or how to carve words, and so we have to use a fabrication company for that.

04-02:10:39

Cooks:

I see.

04-02:10:40

Wyatt:

You know, a lot of projects are like that. Even with tile, even though there's hands-on glazing, still, there's so many different variables involved with that. So to sum it up: you're right on both counts. I'm older now, and I really want to do that, but the main reason I want to do the more intimate pieces is that it's so direct. I don't have to send it out to a fabricator to do this because I don't know how to do it, or get a guy who designs aquariums, or, you know? That's all part of the public art process—my process at least. Yeah.

04-02:11:29

Tewes:

Yeah, you've got your hands on it from start to finish.

04-02:11:28

Wyatt:

Yeah, exactly.

04-02:11:35

Tewes:

That's all I had to [add].

04-02:11:35

Cooks:

Okay.

04-02:11:36

Tewes: Well, thank you so much!

04-02:11:38

Wyatt: Thank you, guys.

04-02:11:38

Cooks: Richard, thank you.

04-02:11:39

Wyatt: I appreciate it. Yeah, this was like a real pleasure. I mean, really.

04-02:11:42

Cooks: For us, just a pure delight! [laughs]

04-02:11:47

Tewes: All right. I'm going to close this out. Thank you.

04-02:11:48

Wyatt: All right.

[End of Interview]