

An Interview with Ella Jenkins  
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## Ella Jenkins

### *Singer charms children with her folk songs*

The woman who popularized the ancient tradition of callandresponse singing in this country can't walk a straight line. She's just too busy calling and responding. Ella Jenkins stops for every child and dog and has a smile and a song for each. Before leaving her townhouse on the North Side, the 76-year-old singer/songwriter turns on the radio for her longhaired dachshund, who listens to both classical music and rockandroll but, Jenkins says, "prefers classical."

For the next two blocks, every child and dog gets a hello until Jenkins hops into a cab. She asks its Nigerian driver if he knows Ebo, then greets him in the African language. When he expresses delight at her interest, this mother of multicultural music tells him that's how she learns languages.

"It was nice talking to you," she says as she gets out. "I like the way you sound."

At the Chicago Historical Society's restaurant, where Jenkins is a regular, the manager complains that he never gets to hear her sing. She appeases him with bird sounds — her new greeting "for babies and dogs 'cause it always gets a smile."

But for all her sweetness, Jenkins has a tough side. This is, after all, the woman who, in the '60s, slapped a sign saying, "Do not serve colored people in this restaurant" in the window of an establishment that barred her. Ibis is the same woman who cuts her rates for performances at public housing complexes, but won't perform for free. She tells organizers to raise funds so they can say, "We brought Ella here."

"It's not good to have your hand out all the time," she says. "It's not good for your children to see that and it's not good for your selfesteem."

That mix of kindness and toughness, respect and enthusiasm, makes Jenkins a magnet for children.

"I never talk down to children," she says. "I always try to find a way that I can communicate."

Such an attitude allows her to keep control in a way that puts many parents and teachers to shame. "I don't lecture," Jenkins says. "I'm not there to teach them manners. But she does set standards with the idea of building a community of respect. Jenkins could almost patent her downtoearth blend of charm and courtesy, talent and teaching, callandresponse.

"What you see is what Ella is," says Bernadelle Richter, her business manager for more than 20 years. "She's a people person. She loves what she does and she enjoys the audience as much as I'm sure they enjoy her. She gets a great deal out of performing."

Anthony Seeger, former curator of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, which records and distributes Jenkins' music, always introduced her as "one of the great treasures of the Smithsonian," on a par with the Hope Diamond. "The Smithsonian has a lot of dead treasures," he says. "It's really nice to have a live one that makes people sparkle wherever they are."

Jenkins is "without question, the bestselling artist on Folkways Recordings," outselling names that are more familiar to folk audiences, including Woody Guthrie and Pete, Seeger, notes Anthony Seeger, Pete's nephew and a professor of ethnomusicology at UCLA "Ella is an amazing performer."

Jenkins' love of what she does is so infectious that such compliments frequently come her way. Her songs in many languages, accompanied by her trademark ukulele or harmonica and a range of small percussion instruments, have won her numerous awards.

"I just hope they can remember at least one or two songs because usually the songs have some kind of meaning," she says of her performances. "I hope that they might feel good about themselves and realize that there's a lot of things they can do and they don't have to compete with other people and know that they had a good time — not just with me but with the people in the room."

Jenkins grew up in a series of South Side neighborhoods with her mother, who worked as a domestic, her brother, now an emeritus professor at the University of Cincinnati, and her uncle, a steel mill worker who played a blues harmonica to relax. "All my music is by ear because I've never studied music," she says. "I just played naturally."

After graduating from DuSable High School in 1942, she discovered "there were no jobs for black kids." One day, she found herself at the William Wrigley Jr. Co. "I just want to know, do you have any jobs for people like me with my color skin?" Jenkins recalls asking the woman in charge of hiring. "She said, 'Young lady, you have to follow the rules like everybody else.'" Jenkins did and was hired to wax boxes that held K rations for the war effort. "It's the reason I chew Doublemint gum still," she says with a laugh.

But it was another job that started Jenkins on her musical path. While delivering mail at the Metallurgical Laboratory at the University of Chicago, she met three young secretaries who asked why she wasn't in college. When she said it was too expensive, they suggested she try a junior college.

Following their advice, Jenkins headed for Wilson Junior College in 1945, spending two years there and another at Roosevelt University. In 1948, Jenkins moved to Berkeley, Calif., where she started performing around town and earned a degree from San Francisco State College.

She never forgot those U of C secretaries. "The reason I got into college and everything was because these young women inspired me," she says. "I often thought of them, but I didn't know how to get in touch with them." Years later she tracked them down through a news item about one of their brothers and was finally able to offer her thanks.

Her musical career really began with her return to Chicago in 1952. She was singing at coffeehouses while working as the teenage program director for the South Parkway YWCA. There she channeled her studies in sociology, child psychology and recreation into innovative music education. An afternoon callandresponse session Jenkins led on a sidewalk with some teenagers and a Conga drum impressed a WTTW employee and led to an appearance on *The Totem Club*, then a daily show on Channel 11. Jenkins was so good she got a weekly segment in 1956. She called it "This is Rhythm" and invited such guests as Odetta and Big Bill Broonzy.

Deciding to give a musical career a try, Jenkins drew up a fiveyear plan. She quit the YWCA, paid her bills and had a show. A friend in the music business told her if she did a demo, he'd send it to Moses "Mo" Asch, who founded Folkways Record Company. Asch liked what he heard and urged her to expand. Jenkins' first album, in 1957, was *Call and Response — Rhythmic Group Singing*. It remains in print and is one of her 33 recordings and two videos.

"I've been freelancing since 1956," Jenkins says of her busy schedule of performance, recording and early childhood education. All are driven by an undeniably strong connection with kids.

Children love Jenkins from the moment they set eyes on her. It starts with her appearance. She favors bright, comfortable clothes, often from the countries whose songs she sings, and whimsical necklaces like the one with children from around the world or another with a tiny harmonica that says "victory." Then there's her warm, engaging manner and cheery laugh that's between a chortle and a chuckle.

"Ella is one of the most effective educators of young people that I know," says Studs Terkel, an author and radio interviewer who has known Jenkins for more than 40 years, since they overlapped at the Old Town School of Folk Music. "She does it in a way that is so salubrious, so healthgiving, because Ella is not only a writer and performer of songs but she becomes that child. She has a childlike quality and I emphasize childlike and so there's an air of wonder. It's like she is doing it for the first time. She's an adult, a very gifted grownup who understands intuitively the way young people think and feel."

For Jenkins, the connection is simple. "I've gotten to know children all over the world. Wherever I've gone I always feel that children have a basic honesty and sincerity," she explains. Children are not caught up with age, color, weight... They don't rate you. They rate you on the basis of a good embrace or handshake."

While she loves them all, "children between 4 and 8 can do almost anything," Jenkins says. "They're very curious about learning and they're always excited by something new." They, in turn, get a great deal from her — as evidenced by the many people who grew up with Jenkins' music and shared it first with their children and now with their grandchildren.

"There was a young man the other day who said, 'I'm 40 now. When I was 3, you came to my nursery school. Do you remember me? I said, 'You look kind of familiar,' ” Jenkins recalls, demonstrating the gentle kindness that fans love. "What pleases me is when people say, 'I listened to you and now I take my children.'

"Whatever they're doing, I hope they still like my music," Jenkins adds. "It makes me feel that how they received music at an early age makes a difference."

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