

ELLA JENKINS

b. August 6, 1924

d. November 9, 2024

FIRST LADY OF CHILDREN'S MUSIC

*"I feel very strongly about making peace
and love in the world."*

**She was a pioneer
of multicultural
children's music.**

Ella Jenkins was an award-winning folk musician and educator. Known as the "First Lady of Children's Music," her joyful, African-American-inspired call-and-response songs revolutionized the genre.

Born in St. Louis, Missouri, Jenkins moved with her family to Chicago's South Side when she was 4. She was raised in a vibrant, multicultural neighborhood filled with music.

After high school, Jenkins worked in a series of jobs before enrolling in Chicago's Roosevelt University. She finished her studies in 1951 at San Francisco State University, earning a degree in sociology with minors in child psychology and recreation.

Jenkins returned to Chicago after graduation and began working at the YWCA and in community centers, where she created songs to engage children from diverse backgrounds. Her interactive style resonated deeply, and before long, she was invited to perform on television. In 1956, she became one of the first African American hosts of a children's TV segment, "This is Rhythm," on WTTW in Chicago. The program featured children of all races and introduced audiences to Black musicians like Odetta and Big Bill Broonzy.

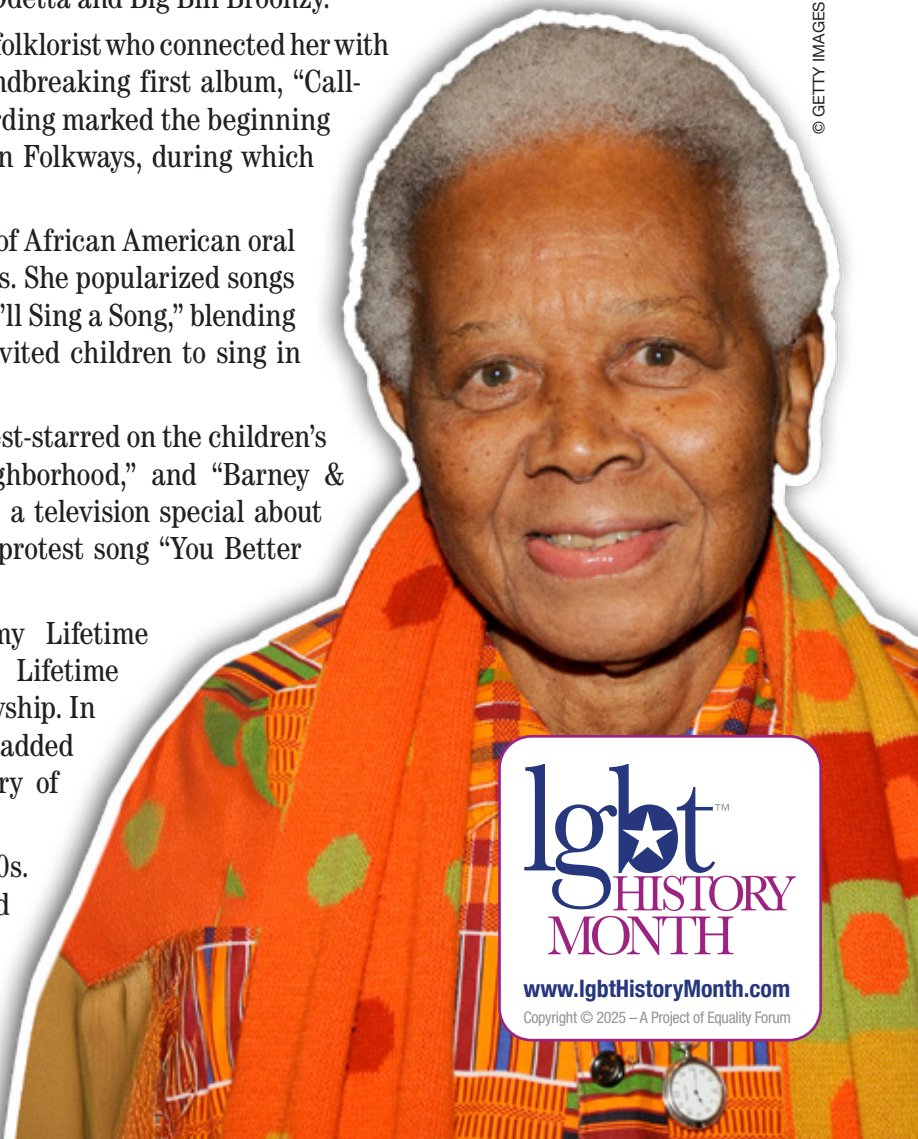
The same year, Jenkins met Kenneth S. Goldstein, a folklorist who connected her with Folkways Records. In 1957, she released her groundbreaking first album, "Call-and-Response: Rhythmic Group Singing." The recording marked the beginning of a prolific, decades-long career with Smithsonian Folkways, during which she released 39 albums.

Jenkins's music drew liberally from the wellspring of African American oral traditions, world cultures, and children's folk games. She popularized songs like "Miss Mary Mack" and "You'll Sing a Song and I'll Sing a Song," blending them with original compositions. Her approach invited children to sing in various languages and rhythms.

Jenkins performed worldwide. In the 1980s, she guest-starred on the children's TV shows "Sesame Street," "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," and "Barney & Friends." In 1985, she appeared on "Free at Last," a television special about Martin Luther King Jr, where she performed the protest song "You Better Leave Segregation Alone."

Jenkins's numerous honors included a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, an ASCAP Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award, and a National Heritage Fellowship. In 2007, "You'll Sing a Song and I'll Sing a Song" was added to the National Recording Registry at the Library of Congress.

Jenkins was professionally active well into her 90s. For her 100th birthday, she celebrated with the Old Town School of Folk Music in Chicago. She died three months later. She shared her life with a female partner for 63 years.



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