

THE FIRST LADY OF CHILDREN'S MUSIC

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Celebrating

Ella Jenkins

BY MIMI BRODSKY CHENFELD



The First Lady of Children's Music



This is a shout-out to "The First Lady of Children's Music", Ella Jenkins. Ella was born in August of 1924 and just celebrated her 98th birthday with a worldwide gathering on Zoom full of congratulations from musicians around the country and the world. It's a good time to honor this beloved national treasure who changed the entire arena of children's music. For those of you who are just being introduced to her, be prepared for a precious discovery.

Born in St. Louis, Missouri but raised in South Side Chicago neighborhoods, Ella's childhood was rich in musical, playful, active environments featuring songs, games, chants, rhythms, and stories.

Her Uncle Floyd taught her harmonica. The great jazz musician, Cab Calloway inspired her with the idea of "call and response" songs. (Growing up in NYC, I clearly remember the street games, songs and chants we loved!)

Breathing in the air of those neighborhoods she took her harmonica, then her ukulele to college along with her fascination for all rhythms and songs! Her college friends came from Central American countries. Her first jobs in recreation centers introduced her to Jewish music. Sharing their cultures enriched the mix of Ella's childhood blend of chants, jazz, Gospel, play songs and African rhythms. She decided to make music her life - especially music for children.

Before we even had the word "multicultural" Ella lived that idea!



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With her constantly growing gathering of songs featuring nursery rhymes, counting songs, friendship songs, holidays (a bursting collection), she traveled around the world - sharing her songs and music with children from cultures. Ella sang on every continent! Her grace and humor, her open-hearted and open-minded spirit, her deep respect for all children, all people, her curiosity, and delight in the diversity of languages and songs pushed open the door to the world. Music is a universal language. Ella's songs in many languages are easy to sing, to move to, and to accompany with movement and dance.



Wherever she performed, she was greeted with warmth and joy as she welcomed participation and encouraged people to sing, clap, bounce, and tap together. The songs she shared helped children learn about others, learn about themselves, and grow in self-confidence and understanding. Whether she sang the Swahili welcome song, Jambo, or the Hebrew welcome song, Shabbat Shalom, the message was clear. We are a united family, and we must learn to live together.



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we must learn to live together.**



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I have known Ella for over 60 years and have shared my favorite songs with children through the decades: *We Are North American Tribes*, *Mary Mack*, *I'll Sing a Song and You Sing a Song* and *We'll Sing a Song Together*, *The World is Big*, *The World is Small*...my list goes on. And Ella's list of forty albums is now in the halls of the *Smithsonian Folkways Records*.

Ella was a frequent guest on Mr. Roger's Neighborhood and Sesame Street. The Grammys created the first Lifetime Achievement Award which was presented to Ella in 2004. A major documentary is being created. Tim Ferrin, the gifted film producer who has been working closely with Ella through these past years, talked about her incredible life's work: "If you listen to her catalog, it's an expansive, encyclopedic knowledge of people and cultures. Her songs are full of humor, playfulness, and love of children." Keep an eye open for the documentary. Check out more info on Google. Share her songs with your kids!



Sing Happy Birthday Ella, along with me!

~Peace!

Mimi Brodsky Chenfeld

