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THE TALK

Children's music never grows old to Ella Jenkins



MARY SCHMICH

Ella Jenkins was sitting under the trees in the afternoon sun, remembering.

"Cab Calloway," she said.

He was one of the people who got her hooked on call-and-response singing. This would have been in the 1930s, on Chicago's South Side, at the Regal Theater, where for a little extra money you could see a stage show after the movie, often featuring Calloway, the great jazzman.

"He'd say, 'I'm going to sing something out to you, and you sing it back to me,'" Jenkins said.

She cleared her throat and began to sing.

"Hidee Hidee Hidee Hi ..."

In the little North Side park on this August afternoon, kids were doing their noisy kid thing, chasing each other across the pavement, squealing on the swings, zipping around in plastic cars, oblivious to the 90-year-old woman with the silver hair, wearing the green caftan, who occasionally broke into song.

Tim Ferrin, on the other hand, was paying deep attention.

He was there with a cameraman and a sound man, coaxing out Jenkins' memories.

Since 1957, with the release of her first album, "Call-And-Response: Rhythmic Group Singing,"

Jenkins has lifted interactive children's music — with its finger-snapping, hand-clapping, imitation, repetition and improvisation — into a teachable art.

She has won a Grammy and performed all over the world. One of her many albums is the best-selling title in the history of the Smithsonian Folkways record label.

But until now, no one has caught the whole Ella Jenkins story in documentary form, as Ferrin is trying to do.

"She's done so much more than people realize in terms of weaving herself into American culture," Ferrin said. "We want to celebrate her impact while she's still here."

And so, one by one, he gathers her stories.

Her uncle's jukebox.

Sitting on the park bench, her dachshund at her feet, Jenkins remembered how her uncle installed a rental jukebox in her childhood living room and had friends pay to play songs until he had enough money to buy it.

She recalled the Boy Scout songs her brother brought home, so different from her mother's Christian Science hymns. And the call-and-response chants of the DuSable High School cheerleaders.

Dancing too. The jitterbug. The rumba.

"Would you cut a rug?" Ferrin asked.

Jenkins laughed.

"Where did you get the expression 'cut a rug'?" she said. "That's not the expression of today."



BRIAN CASSELLA/TRIBUNE PHOTOS

Ella Jenkins talks with filmmaker Tim Ferrin in a park near her North Side home. He is making a documentary on her life.



Jenkins, 90, has lifted interactive children's music into a teachable art.

Jenkins often seems surprised that Ferrin, a 33-year-old who lives in Chicago's Lincoln Square neighborhood, is familiar with distant eras, but that's one reason she agreed to let him make the film. He knew old songs and history.

Ferrin also knows there's no time to waste in making his documentary,

for which he's still raising money. He was in negotiations to interview Jenkins' old friend Pete Seeger when Seeger died, in January. But he can't rush either.

"All these questions," Jenkins finally said the other afternoon.

From a few feet away, Bernadelle Richter said, "She's getting tired."

Richter has been Jenkins' friend and business manager for more than 50 years. They've spent most of it in this North Side neighborhood that they'd rather not name.

"I always felt black people lived on the South Side, and white people lived on the North Side," Jenkins said. The official interview was over, and we were just chatting. "But I went to an art fair one year and thought, 'I would like living here.'"

She looked at Richter.

"1964?"
"1965."

Once racially mixed, the neighborhood is now almost entirely white and affluent, but Jenkins retains her place in it. The bench where she was sitting is part of the park's Ella Jenkins Storytelling Corner. Many people recognize her.

"Are you Miss Jenkins?"

A man carrying a bike helmet approached, the way an awe-struck pupil might. She smiled.

"I want you to know I think about you a lot on Sundays," he said, "because we sing 'This Train' at church."

She watched him walk off to play with his kids. "Isn't it wonderful to see those children over there and hear their sounds?" she said. "I never had any myself, but children have been a part of my life."

She paused to admire the

rhythm of a boy pumping past on a scooter.

"Children," she said, "don't think too much about race, weight, years. If you're kind to them and you know some songs and respect them as people, that's all they care about."

At last, it was time to go. She struggled to get off the bench. Her knees are bad. She'd sat too long. Richter offered her an arm.

Jenkins paused to catch her balance, then reached for her back pocket.

"What's this?" She pulled out a dreidel. She laughed, then with a cane in one hand and her old friend holding the other, she walked toward home, where she loves waking up in the morning to the sound of kids in the playground.

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For information about how you can help bring Ella Jenkins story to the screen, contact Director Tim Ferrin at morningbugle@gmail.com or visit: www.singasonetogether.com



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