

# Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Ella Jenkins

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## Overview of the Collection

<b>Repository:</b>	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
<b>Creator:</b>	Jenkins, Ella
<b>Title:</b>	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ella Jenkins,
<b>Dates:</b>	August 5, 2002
<b>Bulk Dates:</b>	2002
<b>Physical Description:</b>	7 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:28:21).
<b>Abstract:</b>	Folk singer Ella Jenkins (1924 - ) is a popular children's folk musician. Smithsonian Folkways Records has produced over 30 Ella Jenkins albums since 1956. Generations of children have a deeper understanding of the world through her participatory music. Jenkins has served as a U.S. delegate to Hong Kong, China and the former Soviet Union with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Jenkins was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 5, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
<b>Identification:</b>	A2002_133
<b>Language:</b>	The interview and records are in English.

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## Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Ella Louise Jenkins, "the first lady of children's folk song," was born on August 6, 1924, in St. Louis, Missouri. Growing up on Chicago's South Side, Jenkins loved all kinds of games, but adored those involving rhythm, movement and music. Despite never having any formal musical training, Jenkins has become a first-rate composer and musician who plays the ukulele, the pipe organ, the harmonica and a wide variety of percussion instruments, in addition to singing.

Having graduated from high school, Jenkins set out in 1942 to find a job. Working in Wrigley's Gum factory, she earned an associate's degree from Wilson Junior College in 1947 and moved to California in 1948 to increase her opportunities. While watching two children play table tennis at a recreation center, Jenkins gave them some helpful pointers and was overheard by the center's director, who hired her on the spot. After graduating from San Francisco State College in 1951 with a B.A. in sociology, Jenkins moved back to Chicago and became a program director for teenagers at a YWCA in 1952.

While performing with young people on the street one day, she was invited to appear on the public television show, *Totem Club*. Asked to return again and again, Jenkins composed her own music for the first time. Moses Asch, the founder of Folkways Recordings, offered to record her songs. In 1956, Jenkins left her YWCA job to become a professional folk singer and released *Call and Response: Rhythmic Group Singing* the next year. Jenkins has been described as speaking to children, not down to them. Children, even those from vastly different backgrounds, were so enthralled with Jenkins' music that she began teaching children internationally, celebrating the beauty and value of diverse cultures.

The honors Jenkins has received include a Pioneer in Early Television citation, the Parent's Choice Award, a salute

from the Ravinia Festival, a KOHL Education Foundation Lifetime Achievement Award and Cook County Children's Hospital Meritorious Service Award. She has served as a U.S. delegate to Hong Kong, China and the former Soviet Union with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Smithsonian Folkways Records has produced over 30 Ella Jenkins albums since 1956. Generations of children have a deeper understanding of the world through her participatory music.

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## Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Ella Jenkins was conducted by Larry Crowe on August 5, 2002, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 Betacame SP videocassettes. Folk singer Ella Jenkins (1924 - ) is a popular children's folk musician. Smithsonian Folkways Records has produced over 30 Ella Jenkins albums since 1956. Generations of children have a deeper understanding of the world through her participatory music. Jenkins has served as a U.S. delegate to Hong Kong, China and the former Soviet Union with the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

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## Restrictions

### Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

### Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

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## Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

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## Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

### Persons:

Jenkins, Ella

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

### Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews  
Jenkins, Ella--Interviews

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African American women musicians--Interviews

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Folk singers--Interviews

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Chicago (Ill.)--Social life and customs

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Recreation--Illinois--Chicago--History--20th century

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DuSable High School

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African American families--Illinois--Chicago

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Chicago Public Library. George Cleveland Hall Branch

---

Alabama--Description and travel

---

African American arts

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Bronzeville (Chicago, Ill.)

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Music--Juvenile

---

San Francisco State College

---

Children's songs

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Television programs for children

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African Americans--Music--History and criticism

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Musicians--Travel--Interviews

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Discrimination--United States

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Congress of Racial Equality

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Demonstrations--Illinois--Chicago--1960-1969

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## **Organizations:**

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

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## The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

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### Occupations:

Folk Singer

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### HistoryMakers® Category:

MusicMakers

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## Administrative Information

### Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

### Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Ella Jenkins, August 5, 2002. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

### Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

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## Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

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## Detailed Description of the Collection

### Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Ella Jenkins, Section A2002\_133\_001\_001, TRT: 0:31:11 ?  
Folk singer Ella Jenkins speaks in rich detail about growing up on Chicago's South Side -- sharing memories that include street games and rhymes, stage shows at the many neighborhood theaters, Chicago Park District table tennis tournaments, the Bud Billiken Day Parade and participating in a Negro history club at the Chicago Public Library's George Cleveland Hall branch. Jenkins also remembers childhood visits to family in Alabama, where she was baptized during a revival one summer.

African American women musicians--Interviews.  
Folk singers--Interviews.  
Chicago (Ill.)--Social life and customs.  
Recreation--Illinois--Chicago--History--20th century.  
DuSable High School.  
African American families--Illinois--Chicago.  
Chicago Public Library. George Cleveland Hall Branch.  
Alabama--Description and travel.  
African American arts.  
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San Francisco State College.  
Children's songs.  
Television programs for children.  
African Americans--Music--History and criticism.  
Musicians--Travel--Interviews.  
Discrimination--United States.  
Congress of Racial Equality.  
Demonstrations--Illinois--Chicago.

Video Oral History Interview with Ella Jenkins, Section A2002\_133\_001\_002, TRT: 0:31:17 ?

Folk singer Ella Jenkins talks about life on Chicago's South Side in the 1930s and 1940s. She grew up in a poor family but was richly educated at DuSable High School and the Hall Branch public library, influenced by a vibrant African American culture, Bronzeville theaters and dance halls and her 'Uncle Flood's harmonica playing and blues records. She also discourses at length about Southern and African American culture, food and dialect, and the use of dialect in literature.

Video Oral History Interview with Ella Jenkins, Section A2002\_133\_001\_003, TRT: 0:31:15 ?

Singer Ella Jenkins recalls the jobs she held in her youth and her post-secondary education at Wilson Junior College, Roosevelt College and San Francisco State College, from which she graduated in 1951. She also shares her ideas on music, African American history, bridging cultural boundaries, and performing for children.

Video Oral History Interview with Ella Jenkins, Section A2002\_133\_001\_004, TRT: 0:31:15 ?

Ella Jenkins shares memories from her musical career during the 1950s and 1960s. She tells of her debut on Chicago's public television station, WTTW, which then gave her her own program, In Rhythm. She talks about her first record album, Call and Respons, explains the tradition of call and response and then gives an example of it in a song with interviewer Larry Crowe performing the responses. Jenkins also relates anecdotes of the discrimination she encountered in finding places to eat and sleep while on tour, and also discusses her own involvement in sit-ins and restaurant testing for the Congress of Racial Equality.

Video Oral History Interview with Ella Jenkins, Section A2002\_133\_001\_005, TRT: 0:31:11 ?

Folk singer Ella Jenkins shares her thoughts about street rhymes and songs, tells about musicians she has met and admired, and discusses her experiences performing for children and her wish to spread a positive message in dangerous times.

Video Oral History Interview with Ella Jenkins, Section A2002\_133\_001\_006, TRT: 0:24:12 ?

Folk musician Ella Jenkins talks about the most important highlights of her life, her current projects, her legacy and her hopes for the black community.

Video Oral History Interview with Ella Jenkins, Section A2002\_133\_001\_007, TRT: 0:28:00 ?

Ella Jenkins narrates her photographs.