

“It’s Awfully Important to Listen”: Ella Jenkins and Musical Multiculturalism

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In 1995, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings released *Multicultural Children’s Songs*, a collection of twenty-three tracks by the prolific composer, performer, and educator Ella Jenkins. Although it appeared as a new recording, the CD drew from Jenkins’ extensive back catalog with Folkways, the storied independent label acquired by the Smithsonian Institution in 1987. The songs “Tahboo” and “Greeting in Arabic (Eh-he-lan we-se-he-len)” drew from Jenkins’ 1957 debut, *Call-and-Response Rhythmic Group Singing*, the album that established her as an important new voice in children’s music.¹ “May-ree Mack,” a version of the African American handclapping song, was sampled from her 1966 bestseller *You’ll Sing a Song and I’ll Sing a Song*, while “We are Native American Tribes” drew from her Bicentennial album *We are America’s Children* (1976) and “Mexican Handclapping Song” originated in the 1961 album *This is Rhythm*. A sprawling collection, *Multicultural Children’s Songs* gathered material both original and traditional, sung or chanted in a variety of languages, and ranging broadly over continents and styles. Some of this content was exceedingly simple, appealing to the youngest audiences. “Thank You in Many Languages” was a multilingual civility primer in fifty-one seconds. Other tracks, like “Dance Tunes from Many Lands,” were more complex, incorporating a rich variety of distinct rhythms and timbres.

It was Tony Seeger, the eminent ethnomusicologist then helming Smithsonian-Folkways, who came up with the idea of reissuing selections of Jenkins’ newly digitized catalog under the *Multicultural* moniker. Although the term “multicultural” in the United States originated with 1960s grassroots movements in race- and class-conscious early education, by the 1990s, as Jodi Melamed has documented, multiculturalism had become a watchword of the liberal state’s promotion of tolerance and diversity in various spheres of public life, including public education.² In effect, Seeger recognized in the 1990s vogue for multiculturalism an opportunity to bring Jenkins’ eclectic, folk-inspired repertoire—already beloved by generations of children, educators, and librarians—to new and broader audiences. Jenkins had not previously used the term to label or categorize her work, but she acceded to Seeger’s idea, selecting material for and contributing liner notes to the 1995 compilation.

Multicultural Children's Songs went on to achieve landmark status in the history of American children's music, cumulatively outselling recordings by Woody Guthrie, Pete Seeger, and Lead Belly, the men more typically imagined to be Folkways' gold-standard artists. It cemented the reputation of Jenkins, then in her early seventies, as the most prolific and influential American children's musician of the late twentieth century, and spurred the release of a follow-up, *More Multicultural Children's Songs from Ella Jenkins*, in 2014. To date, *Multicultural Children's Songs* is the second-best-selling Smithsonian-Folkways release in the label's history, second only to Jenkins' *You'll Sing a Song and I'll Sing a Song*, the title track of which was entered into the Library of Congress's prestigious National Recording Registry in 2007. More than a quarter-century since its release, *Multicultural Children's Songs* remains a staple of early education classrooms and curriculums. Parents seeking out non-commercial children's fare can today find Jenkins' CD in the children's section of independent bookstores, where it sits next to titles such as *World Playground*, the 1999 album that launched the Putumayo Kids imprint.

The collection of her recordings under the rubric of *Multiculturalism* in the 1990s made it possible for Jenkins' labors to be framed and appropriated, capitalized upon and appreciated in new ways. Yet this framing also threatens to erase Jenkins' radicalism as a musician and educator, obscuring the roots of her distinct approach to children's music in various strands of post-World War II progressivism, including civil rights and anti-fascism. As Melamed argues that the concept and practice of multiculturalism have been "detached from the history of racial conflict and antiracist struggle" through late-twentieth- and early-twenty-first-century hegemonic appropriations (Melamed 2006, 19), so the term "multicultural" does not adequately or accurately capture Jenkins' musical practice, in which sound and song are important vehicles of historical consciousness, subjugated knowledge, and democratic values. While 1990s discourses on multiculturalism were driven both by demographic trends and by the increasing incorporation of ethnic and racial difference into capitalist logics, Jenkins' work originated in a context of emerging efforts to decolonize music curricula and reimagine musical pedagogies, projects which had begun in the 1930s but gathered steam in the 1950s.

In what follows, I mine the material collected in *Multicultural Children's Songs* to explore the evolution of Jenkins' practice, situating her at the forefront of post-World War II transformations in children's music, and positioning her work alongside developments in both progressive early education and the burgeoning Chicago folk music scene. My aim is to establish Jenkins' rich catalog of music and writing as an important archive

of multiculturalism's radical pre-history, and in so doing to locate Jenkins within the annals of late-twentieth-century progressive, anti-racist and anti-nationalist cultural activism. In the process, I elaborate on Jenkins' own theorization of "listening" to think about her work as a model of black feminist democratic practice in early childhood music education. While it is not my intention here to enter into debates about the "multicultural" turn of the 1990s and beyond, I seek to think about Jenkins' practice along the lines of what Chandra Mohanty has dubbed "radical multiculturalism," differentiating it from a multiculturalism that abets the expansion of state power and of capitalism via a logic of difference as "benign variation" (Mohanty 2003, 193). It follows that I focus on issues of production, or the choices and strategies that inform Jenkins' practice, rather than consumption, or the ways that educators and other adults have taken up compilations such as *Multicultural Children's Songs*.

My investment in critically engaging with Jenkins' work and career is not simply a matter of "remembering" her or setting the historical record straight—both of which I regard as important (if not uncomplicated) pursuits—but has deeper stakes that relate to the obscured cultural labors of women, especially black women, in American music culture. As much as the category of "multicultural children's music" created a means for Jenkins (and the men and women who both preceded and followed her) to gain cultural recognition, so it has also served as a naturalizing frame that threatens to obscure the significance of her political and aesthetic choices, including her decision to work almost exclusively with children. What concerns me here is the danger of a de-historicized view of Jenkins, one that reduces her work to platitudes or conflates her identity as a black woman with an intellectual and cultural project that "values diversity," as the language of liberal corporate bureaucracies would have it. It is in this spirit that I am interested in pushing back gently against the monikers—of "national treasure," "First Lady of Children's Music," and "Magical Pied Piper" (Dimicelli 1978)—that recur almost ritualistically in the journalism about Jenkins from the 1960s to the present. While they serve a practical purpose in giving a name to her extraordinary achievements, such appellations are also simplifications that obscure the more nuanced cultural histories that most interest me, and which I see as central to an understanding of Jenkins' place within twentieth-century cultural history.

This claim can be illustrated with an anecdote. At a talk he gave around the time of the release of *Multicultural Children's Music*, Tony Seeger challenged his audience to guess the identity of Smithsonian-Folkways' best-selling artist ("Before Barney" 1995).³ The question was rhetorical bait, intended to elicit the names of Guthrie and Pete Seeger (Tony Seeger's

uncle); but the “surprise” answer was Ella Jenkins. Not only had sales of children’s recordings constituted a significant portion of Folkways’ revenue before Smithsonian’s acquisition of the label’s catalog—more than 50 percent, according to a 1978 estimate of Folkways founder Moses “Moe” Asch—but also sales of Jenkins’ many albums had helped keep Folkways afloat in lean times, affording Asch the ability to pursue pet projects of little or no commercial appeal (Bluestein 1994, 120; see also Carlin 2008, 142; and Olmstead 2003, 73). It was Jenkins, moreover, who almost single-handedly put Folkways at the forefront of the emerging educational market for children’s music in the late 1950s, thereby assuring the label’s association with “quality” children’s fare and helping to keep children’s albums by Lead Belly, Guthrie, and Seeger in circulation. A pioneering entrepreneur, Jenkins built the educational market for her recordings, and for Folkways’ children’s catalog more generally, by crisscrossing the country for performances and workshops, often accompanied by her white manager Bernadelle Richter. As Atlantic Records in the 1950s became known as the “House that Ruth Built”—a reference to the sustaining sales provided by rhythm-and-blues hit-maker Ruth Brown in the label’s early years—so Folkways is, in these respects, *The House that Ella Built*. At 95 (as of August 6, 2019), she builds and sustains it still.

Seeger’s anecdote illustrates a central contradiction of Jenkins’ career, in which she is both popular and obscure, central and marginal, known and unknown, the “First Lady of Children’s Music” and—as this “first lady” title implicitly conveys—seen as secondary to musicians whose labors are not primarily directed toward children. She is publicly renowned and yet, as Daphne Brooks writes of black female musicians, “at once and nonetheless fascinatingly, defiantly, and unpredictably subcultural and counterpublic” (Brooks [n.d.], 30). Despite serious institutional plaudits—including a 1999 Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (the first awarded to a woman or to a children’s music performer), a 2004 Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award, and a 2017 National Heritage Fellowship from the National Endowment of the Arts—there are no critical studies of Jenkins’ vast oeuvre.⁴ I attribute this in part to the neglect of non-commercial children’s music by scholars of American culture, but also to the social alignment of the children’s musician with the devalued labors of early-childhood educators, even as those who work with children have often been at forefront of social justice movements, whether the early-twentieth-century move toward progressive education or twenty-first-century resistance to neoliberal privatization and austerity.⁵

The invisibility of such (feminized) labor as a force for social and

cultural change renders it all the more noteworthy that Jenkins has assiduously documented her own career, taking care to represent her work in a manner that resists erasure and misrepresentation. Given a degree of artistic agency that was rare at commercial labels, Jenkins has not only produced (or co-produced) all of her recordings, but exercised creative control over such visual elements as album illustration and design. Through Ellbern, the publishing company she formed with Richter, she retains ownership of her original compositions and receives royalties for their use. The liner notes for her recordings—many containing lengthy statements about her philosophy of children’s musicality and the sources of her creativity—constitute, in themselves, a significant literary archive, one in which, to use Brooks’ formulation, Jenkins is able to “expand on, complement, complicate and/or subvert [her] accompanying sonic text” (Brooks [n.d.], 79).

The absence of Jenkins within humanities scholarship is a significant omission, moreover, insofar as non-commercial children’s music in the United States is a cultural project of the Popular Front era that continues, via the agency of children of the Old Left, into the Cold War era (Denning 1998, 360). As I document below, Jenkins’ catalog of children’s songs from “different places” reflects the internationalism of the 1950s American left broadly speaking, as well as a certain progressive orientation toward the child as a subject of education and enculturation. (This is the same orientation that gave rise to progressive summer camps, which provided a crucial source of livelihood for blacklisted musicians during McCarthyism’s darkest days.⁶) Jenkins created children’s music that translated and elaborated the era’s progressive internationalism, as well as its commitments to decolonization and anti-racism. She did so while drawing on her own formative experiences as a working-class African American girl growing up amid the modern civil rights movement.

Before moving on to consider Jenkins’ recordings, I turn briefly to her biography, highlighting aspects of her life that provide particular insight into what I am calling her black feminist democratic practice, in order to differentiate it from de-politicized conceptions of multiculturalism as the superficial celebration of “difference.”⁷ What I am after here is not just a sense of her social, cultural, and intellectual formation, but a means of understanding how her project as a musician-educator took root in her experiences of racism and sexism, and how post-War social justice movements, preeminent among them civil rights, came to shape her practice and repertoire.

Current Musicology

Born in St. Louis, Missouri in 1924, Jenkins grew up on Chicago's South Side under the watchful eye of her mother, a Christian Scientist who worked mainly as a domestic and taught her children to value education and respect their elders. The family owned a radio but, because of her mother's faith, music—including the new blues-influenced gospel music then emerging in the city—was not an important part of Jenkins' home life. On the other hand, an aunt and uncle with whom she frequently stayed had their own jukebox, which introduced her to popular singers and Chicago-based blues and jazz musicians including Bessie Smith, Bing Crosby, Billie Holliday, Big Bill Broonzy, and Little Brother Montgomery. Rhythm was an early preoccupation of Jenkins, pursued through an interest in the theatrics of entertainers Danny Kaye and Cab Calloway, the latter of whom she saw perform at Chicago's Regal Theater, and a passion for table tennis (she beat out a white competitor to win the 1948 women's Chicagoland championship; see "Ella Jenkins. . ." 1948). After graduating from DuSable High School, known for a music program that had produced such notable alumni as Dorothy Donegan and Nat "King" Cole, Jenkins attended Woodrow Wilson Junior College (alma mater of Gwendolyn Brooks) and Roosevelt College, receiving her sociology degree in 1951 from San Francisco State University, a school that would later be at the forefront of introducing Black Studies in higher education. Returning to Chicago after graduation, she worked as Teenage Program Director for the South Side YWCA, then understood as a progressive alternative to the YMCA. Although she had been composing and arranging her own music since the late 1940s, it was around this time that Jenkins began seriously contemplating a career as a children's musician and educator.

Jenkins' first big professional break came in 1956, when she was offered a recurring spot on *The Totem Club*, a local Chicago children's television program. That same year, at the urging of folklorist and record producer Kenneth Goldstein, she traveled to New York in the hopes of convincing Moe Asch to sign her to a recording contract. (On the way to the Folkways office, she bumped into her good friend Odetta, who advised her not to forget to ask for royalties.) Asch saw potential in the acetate demo she played for him and sent her back to Chicago with instructions to keep working on her music. *Call-and-Response Rhythmic Group Singing*, the 1957 album that launched her career, was the fruit of these labors.

While Jenkins is sometimes referred to, and has often referred to herself as, an "untrained" musician (Terkel 1993), she has also critiqued the assumptions conveyed by the concept of training, insofar as it implied formal musical instruction in a certain European canon. In her liner notes for *A Long Time to Freedom* (1970), an album dedicated to the work of

Martin Luther King, Jr. and featuring gospel, spirituals, work songs, blues, and “songs of freedom,” she portrayed the various Chicago neighborhoods of her childhood (the family moved frequently) as a site of vital musical education. “Growing up in a black community on the South Side of Chicago,” she recalled, “one automatically seeped in some semblance of ‘musical background’ because music encircled the area—at least where poor people lived. Where I lived there were numerous basements of ordinary apartment buildings that had regular ‘policy’ operations. . . . Almost always one could catch an ear of ‘down home’ music flowing from the basement.” And “If you lived in the ‘Black Belt,’” she continued,

you couldn’t help hearing a variety of church music—organ and piano playing, rhythmic foot-stomping, intricate hand-clapping, versatile tambourine beating and tambourine-shaking, some singing, some shouting—on a Sunday morning or afternoon because many churches . . . used to amplify their services to the outside so that anyone passing by could “catch a little goodness.” . . . [I]f you didn’t have a record player at home or a juke box, you could always stand out side [sic] the small, local record shop that blasted the latest discs through the loudspeakers. There were lots of spots and many corners where one could turn to get some “musical Training”—to get some “cultural background.” (*Ibid.*, 2)

Jenkins’ 1970 account represents her childhood as musically saturated with the sounds of gospel, blues, and popular/commercial song. (In this text, at least, there is no mention of musical education at school.) And while her narrative is laced with nostalgia, the sweetness of her reminiscence is tempered by its trenchant subtext. Especially in her use of scare quotes around key phrases—“musical background,” “Black Belt,” “musical Training” (with a capital T), and “cultural background”—Jenkins distances herself both from the racially objectifying constructions of urban neighborhoods and from the willful ignorance of outsiders who equate economic hardship with cultural impoverishment. In the environment that Jenkins describes, moreover, vernacular music and popular, commercial sounds co-exist, in a sonic mash-up that resists classification. Her placement of this story in the liner notes of an album in which she collaborates with both Brother John Sellers, the Mississippi-born musician with roots in the Sanctified Church, and Joseph Brewer, a highly trained tenor who studied voice at Chicago’s Roosevelt College, underscores her critique, emphasizing at once the complexity of black music and the black collective.

The liner notes for *A Long Time to Freedom* elaborated on ideas Jenkins had begun to develop in junior college, where she encountered classmates of Puerto Rican, Cuban, and Mexican heritage. Her efforts to learn about the rhythms, instrumentation, and musical styles associated with the cul-

tures of these students prompted Jenkins to begin to think more systematically about the musical culture of her girlhood. “It was also during this time,” she writes, again in the 1970 liner notes, “that I became conscious of the fact that many of the songs and game rhythms that I sang and played as a child—learning from other children and sometimes from adults—were in essence—true folk idiom.”

In narrating the intellectual journey that led to this realization, Jenkins explicitly connects the dots between her own notion of “folk idiom” and the discourses of the folk revival, whose proponents were often more drawn to the songs of nineteenth-century English working-class laborers than to the sonic musical rituals of black girls. Moreover, in linking her exposure to the musical worlds of her junior college classmates to her own growing realization that she, too, possessed “folk” knowledge, Jenkins offered a submerged critique of the figure of the white male folklorist, who ventures into the “field” to gain access to “true folk idiom.” Similar to Zora Neale Hurston in her 1930s fieldwork for the Federal Music Project, Jenkins fashioned herself as a folk music collector who gathers “material” by learning it from others, in a process that depends on social relationships rather than recording technologies. Unlike so many of the collectors whose published work influenced the folk revival, but akin to such modernist artists such as Hurston and Langston Hughes, Jenkins self-consciously aligned herself with the “folk” and worked to dignify folk music as a sonic conduit of collective knowledge and community values.

Jenkins’ inquiry into the nature and range of folk idioms led her to investigate the African roots of African American music well before the Black Power-era valorization of “roots.” Melville J. Herkovitz, author of the influential study *The Myth of the Negro Past* (1941) had only recently established Northwestern University’s African Studies program, the nation’s first, when Jenkins began researching African rhythms and experimenting with bringing African percussive instruments into classrooms. In an era when many African Americans regarded Africa as a source of shame or embarrassment, following U.S. cultural representations that pictured the continent in terms of its lack of “civilization,” Jenkins insisted on the beauty and importance of African rhythms, both on their own terms and as vital elements of the diasporic music of the Americas. Here, standard journalistic descriptions of Jenkins, in identifying her as a “rhythm specialist”—a term of art she has also used over the years to describe herself—obscure the significance of these choices as an expression of an anti-colonial orientation toward African peoples and cultures. Before 1960s musical groups like the Last Poets began performing raps over the beats of conga drums, Jenkins was proselytizing about the value of African rhythm instruments in the

development of American children's musicality. When her black teenage charges at the Chicago YWCA voiced resistance to learning about Africa, she started a "Latin American" club, smuggling knowledge of Africa into the classroom by means of "Cuban" (i.e., Afro-Cuban) rhythms (House 1992). On *Totem Club*, a television program that was not immune from the sorts of cultural appropriations familiar within Cold War-era children's culture—in one episode, the white male host appears in full "Native" head-dress—Jenkins went a step further, playing African drums with children and introducing young viewers to such self-consciously Black musicians as Odetta and Broonzy.

Jenkins' insistence on the African foundations of pan-American musical traditions aligns her pedagogical interests in the 1950s with a burgeoning civil rights project that increasingly sought to link African American political struggles to liberation movements on the African continent. At the same time, her emphasis on the cultural knowledge of *children*, particularly urban black children, affiliates her with the integrationist and ant-racist agenda of progressive educators, many of whom were women. When Jenkins began a career at Folkways, she became affiliated with a cohort of such progressive female educator-musicians—including Beatrice Landreck, Ruth Crawford Seeger, and Charity Bailey—working to transform musical instruction in the United States. The political stakes of such pedagogical projects was neatly summarized by Odetta, who once told an interviewer:

My education on several levels started with my getting into folk music. . . . I started learning history that we were not being taught in school. The "heroes" that we learned about in school were the ones who garnered money for themselves and had their boots on our necks. (Jacobson 2019, 22–23).

Odetta's characterization of folk music as a source of counter-knowledge that contests the misinformation purveyed by the Cold War-era state is of particular importance to Jenkins' own project in the 1950s. It suggests folk music as a source of ideological critique and points to the pedagogical value of forms of cultural expression often understood as entertainment or play. It also suggests that subjugated knowledges can be made available even to very young children, and that children flourish when they are encouraged to see themselves—to refer back to Jenkins' 1970 liner notes—as possessors of "cultural background" and "musical Training." And it underscores the centrality of intergenerational knowledge-transmission to the institutions of the folk revival, including folk clubs, college-campus hootenannies, touring folk reviews, summer camps, instructional literature, and commu-

nity schools such as Chicago's own Old Town School of Folk Music.

It is within this context that we can see Jenkins' 1957 release of *Call-and-Response Group Singing* on Folkways as her entrée into the small but influential milieu of progressive children's music. As David Bonner explains in his invaluable study *Revolutionizing Children's Music*, while Victor and Columbia produced children's recordings in the 1920s, most of what was marketed to children (via the agency of the adults who could purchase these recordings) took an "eat your vegetables" approach, feeding young listeners "high" musical culture in simplified, ostensibly kid-friendly forms. Seizing on excitement about the new phonographic technology as an instructional tool, Victor put out a series of operatic recordings designed for elementary students, while Columbia, through its newly established Educational Department, released Mother Goose fare presented in operatic style (Bonner 2008, 11–12). Yet as these examples suggest, the ideological orientation of these recordings was of cultural uplift. The end game of this sort of children's music, which used recording technology to bring the concert hall into the classroom, was "appreciation," such that children would not only recognize an established canon but internalize a sense of the superior value of certain musical forms and traditions.

Less high-toned early approaches to music for children developed in the 1930s and 1940s, but these, too, followed from culturally orthodox notions of culture and of children alike. Frank Luther, a hillbilly artist on the Decca label, became a popular children's recording star in the 1930s by channeling a culturally conservative repertoire through an appealing, folksy demeanor (Bonner 2008, 12). And the early twentieth century saw the phenomenal rise of Walt Disney, whose *Silly Symphony* series of animated shorts, launched in 1929, introduced children of the Depression to Western orchestral music, providing the template for full-length features such as *Fantasia* (1940), which was set to a classical score performed by the Philadelphia Orchestra. The success of Disney's anthropomorphized instruments spawned copycats, including "Tubby the Tuba," a character launched through a 1945 recording that Bonner calls "the first bona fide hit in the children's record business" (*Ibid.*, 31). *Variety* dubbed the new children's recordings "kidisks," and along with *Billboard* projected a burgeoning market for such products in an era of post-war prosperity.

Yet if commercial record labels had for decades been targeting children as *consumers* of musical entertainment, "children's music" as a genre that addressed the development of the child herself was a distinct enterprise of independent entrepreneurs. At its forefront were two small labels, Young People's Records (YPR), formed in 1946 with a mission to serve the needs of "thoughtful parents of creative children," and Folkways, the label that suc-

ceeded Moe Asch's earlier imprint, Asch Records (Bonner 2008, 19). Both labels developed children's music catalogs influenced by trends in progressive education, which emphasized the cultivation of children's "natural" creativity and their capacity to learn through movement and play. And both emphasized the power of recorded music in inculcating democratic and egalitarian ideals in children. When Asch declared to Izzy Young, a fixture of the Greenwich Village folk scene, "My children's records are *not* kiddie music," he was thus drawing a bright line between the Folkways catalog and the "kidisks" associated with Walt Disney or with stars such as Roy Rogers and Gene Autry. "I won't do just any children's record," he said,

it has to fit my concept of what a children's record is. First of all, we treat children as people, and the content has to be something that a child would communicate with: Would tell him something, would teach, or would motivate for dance or rhythm or writing or seeing things. . . . [T]hey have to treat the child as a child. Like, I would not issue an animal album in which the animals speak, because I can't conceive of a child thinking that an animal *is* a human being. (Carlin 2008, 135)

While Asch may have been off-base in some of his remarks—in fact, many children seemed to enjoy the whimsicality of talking animals—his approach to children's records reflected new ideas of "child-centered" teaching, which recharacterized children's resistance to sitting still while music played as an opportunity for learning rather than discipline. This approach, influenced by Asch's association with the progressive independent school the Little Red School House, which his son Michael attended, had yielded his business impressive results in the years leading up to Jenkins' debut.⁸ Lead Belly's *Play Parties in Song and Dance*, released in 1941 on Asch Records, exposed a little-seen side of the versatile musician, then still being pictured in the popular press as an ex-convict from Angola State Prison (Light 2015).⁹ The Woody Guthrie albums *Nursery Days* (1951) and *Songs to Grow on for Mother and Child* (1956), inspired by Guthrie's experience as a father and by his marriage to acclaimed modern dancer Marjorie Mazia Guthrie, included notes urging adults to listen and move with their children rather than treat the phonograph as an "electronic babysitter." Pete Seeger, who was able to skirt the professional limitations imposed on blacklisted musicians by performing for children in the 1950s, released several Folkways albums of "musical Americana" for listeners as young as five (Carlin 2008, 140; Mitgang 1956). In addition to publishing these works by established artists, Asch's label had supported more experimental endeavors, such as *Rhythms of the World* (1955), an album that paired narration by Langston Hughes with documentary sounds from the Folkways archive, and *1, 2, 3, and a Zing Zing Zing* (1953), which collected

the documentary recordings of children in West Manhattan playing street games and playing songs made by sound archivist Tony Schwartz.

These were notable precursors to Jenkins, but it was Charity Bailey, director of the Little Red School House music program between 1946 and 1955, who set the most immediate precedent for her at Folkways. Unlike the male performers on Asch's label, but like Jenkins, Bailey, an African American woman hailing from Providence, Rhode Island, saw herself primarily as a music educator and secondarily as an entertainer. This is reflected in the title of her first Folkways LP, *Music Time: A Teaching Record with Charity Bailey* (1952), a brief collection of instructional songs that found Bailey drawing on her background as a Julliard-trained vocalist and the first African American to receive certification in the Dalcroze Method, which emphasized children's kinesthetic learning. In her liner notes, Bailey cheerfully advised classroom teachers to play *Music Time* in a room with "nothing breakable around so you won't jiggle it loose when you start dancing" (Bailey 1952; Kline 1993, 44). Like other progressive music educators, including the German composer Carl Orff whose signature books appeared in English translation in the 1950s as *Orff Schulwerk: Music for Children* (see Spitz 2019 in this issue), Bailey reconceptualized children's playful, embodied response to sound as an essential component of their musical cognition, which could be nurtured through simple exercises such as clapping or moving along to a beat. Anticipating Jenkins, Bailey understood rhythm as a key both to expanding the repertoire of children's music and to exploring new pedagogical practices that ventured beyond the paradigms of appreciation or the acquisition of note-reading skills.

Bailey also blazed a professional path for Jenkins, pursuing education as one of the few professional fields available to African American female college graduates at mid-century (Axtell [n.d.]). Notwithstanding the relative accessibility of teaching, as a young woman Bailey fought the Providence School Board over racial discrimination in hiring within the city's public schools (as told by the *Evening Tribune*: "Colored Girl Gets a Hearing Before the School Committee" 1928). Jenkins, too, would experience racism as a personal and professional obstacle as she traveled the country peddling her recordings while conducting teacher workshops and performing. In a letter to Asch dated October 8, 1962 and postmarked Greencastle, Indiana, she described the toll this travel took on her well-being:

At present I am on tour of Indiana schools presenting school assemblies and learning very fast that Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, etc. are not the only states who are afraid and suspicious of the Negro.

Without spiritual guidance I could not continue this tour. I shall keep seeking that "basic good in every man."

Jenkins' letter is striking for describing difficulties familiar to the era's most commercially popular black musicians, from Ray Charles to Etta James. "Children don't think too much about race, weight, years," Jenkins told an interviewer in 2014. "If you're kind to them and you know some songs and respect them as people, that's all they care about" (Schmich 2014). Yet the adults who facilitated children's access to her music were often no different from those in the entertainment industry. Jenkins' music countered the pervasive racism she encountered, sometimes through the "messages" in her songs and chants, but more often through her approach to repertoire and arrangements. As Jenkins had attempted to impart curiosity about and pride in African heritage to her YWCA students, so she not only personally integrated classrooms throughout the United States, but also used her access to instruct children and educators in a method that centered around rhythm as an embodied conduit to new knowledge.

Call-and-Response Rhythmic Group Singing delineated many of the hallmarks of Jenkins' practice. The LP's cover photograph (Figure 1) showed Jenkins singing and playing a conga drum, her chin tilted slightly upward and eyes closed in pleasurable contemplation. She is framed by two girls from the group of upper-school students from Howalton Day School, an African American private school on Chicago's South Side, with whom she collaborated on the recording. (Beginning with this album, Jenkins would always credit children for their participation.) One plays the claves as she smiles up at Jenkins; another shakes maracas. The image is cropped to focus on this trio, although loosely enough that the viewer sees at its bottom edges the back of a boy's head and other hands playing tambourines and maracas, suggesting a group that lies beyond the photograph's frame. In many ways, the image recalls images from earlier Folkways children's LPs, which replaced the violins and singing saxophones of Disney products with images of Lead Belly and Bailey playing string instruments for child audiences. Yet while the cover of *Call-and-Response Rhythmic Group Singing* similarly represents Jenkins working with children, in the image these staple instruments of the folk revival are replaced by the sort of percussion instruments that Jenkins might have brought to her Latin American club. At the same time, nothing about this image exoticizes these instruments or positions them within a folkloristic visual frame. All three figures appear as neatly dressed and "modern" American subjects, with Jenkins wearing delicate drop earrings and a neatly pressed hairdo.

The words superimposed over the image name what is happening in the scene as "call-and-response rhythmic group singing," a phrase that notably omits the word *children*. To get at what Jenkins meant by this title phrase, it is worth making a brief detour through Tony Schwartz's more

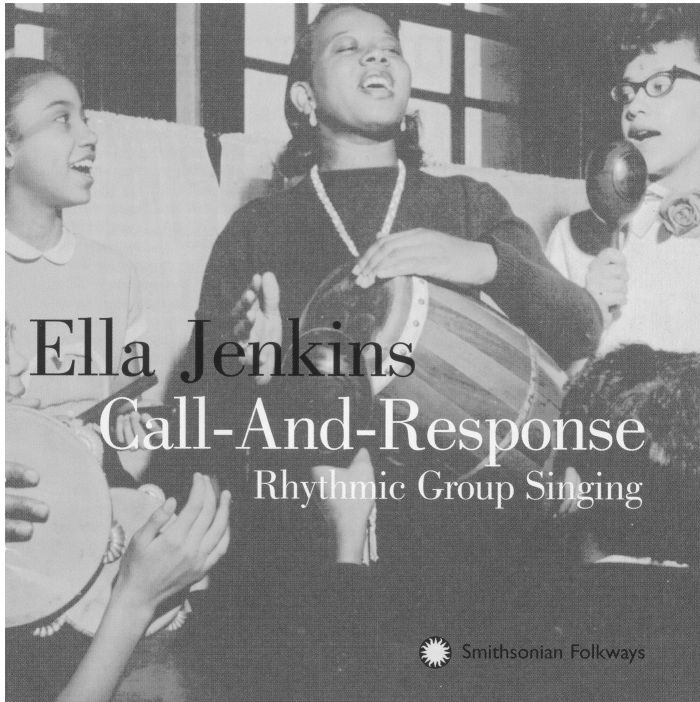


Figure 1: Cover photo of Ella Jenkins, *Call-and-Response Rhythmic Group Singing*. Courtesy of Smithsonian Folkways Recordings. Photo by Jo Banks.

playfully-titled LP *1, 2, 3, and a Zing Zing Zing*. In his liner notes for this documentary recording of children in West Manhattan playing street games and singing songs, Schwartz recounts how he came to record one of the children, a 12-year-old girl who can be heard on one track performing material she learned at a Fresh Air Fund summer camp. Perhaps out of shyness, Schwartz notes, the girl would not perform for him or his tape recorder unless she could get the other children to sing with her. This she accomplished in a single sentence to her peers: “You have to say what I say” (Schwartz 1952).

What Jenkins called “call-and-response” singing—often shortened in discussions of her work to “call and response”—was a version of the 12-year-old’s “You have to say what I say,” and it grounded her pedagogy in a game of collective listening. Call and response took advantage of children’s hard-wired predisposition to mimic, a fundamental aspect of human language-learning, to reframe singing as repetition, or in the case of Schwartz’s 12-year-old performer, doing as you’re told. Because it took

vocalizing outside of the realm of formal presentation and rendered it part of a group activity in which everyone had an equal stake, call and response was enormously important to Jenkins' ability to enlist supposedly non-musical children (and adults) to sing in public. Call and response also supported her wish to demystify music as the cultural domain of professionals, an orientation that she would critique in the 1970 liner notes, and re-signified it as a form of reiterative "play" at which children, even those with physical and intellectual disabilities, were already adept. Perhaps most importantly, although it was vertically organized around a leader, call and response, like the group singing promulgated by Pete Seeger and other folk revivalists, was also radically egalitarian, having as its end goal a kind of horizontality, in which the follower becomes adept enough to become the leader of a future song. Indeed, it named the process by which Jenkins acquired her repertoire: by asking others to teach her a song and then mimicking them.

Thus, despite its vaguely ethnographic ring, call-and-response rhythmic group singing offered itself as archival tool in opposition to concepts of ethnographic fidelity or folkloristic purity. This is illustrated by "Tahboo," one of the only tracks from the 1957 album selected by Jenkins for inclusion in *Multicultural Children's Songs*. As she explained in the liner notes written for the 1995 compilation, "Tahboo" is "not an actual African song" although "it features call-and-response singing to a single drum as do many African songs." That is, "Tahboo" is not *authentic*, a distinction that involves the policing of boundaries; rather, it is *representative*, typical or illustrative in a way that does not depend on a singular definition. For Jenkins, distinguishing between authenticity and representativeness served a practical end in mitigating the anxiety children and adults feel about making new sounds, particularly if they know these sounds connote a "foreign" language. This explains tracks such as "Toom-Bah-Ee-Lero," another song on *Call-and-Response Rhythmic Group Singing*, which is never identified as a Spanish-language song, although the title word clearly approximates the Spanish word *timbalero*, or player of timbales. In rejecting the ideal of fidelity to a standard, or notions of correct pronunciation, she could overcome children's anxiety around singing or chanting in the "right" way.

In a related manner, it is significant that in the liner notes written for *Call-and-Response Group Singing*, Jenkins takes great pains to avoid associating call and response exclusively with Africa and African diasporic music. Instead, she explains in her liner notes that the "'call-and response' pattern of singing" is "dominant in the songs and chants of West Africa, in the cult music of Cuba, and found in songs of India, Greece, North

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Africa, and the Middle East.” Chanting in the “call-and-response’ manner, so common in churches and synagogues,” she continues, “has a way of creating and maintaining a warm group feeling. The song or chant’s very pattern causes the group to be attentive, to wonder what is to come next, and be willing to cooperate with the leader” (Jenkins 1957). In this, Jenkins gestures toward an ideal of embodied listening as a cultural practice of community. At the same time, her resistance to naming call and response as solely or especially African serves to de-fetishize an often fetishized aspect of African American culture.

The practice of call and response is illustrated in “Tahboo,” the LP’s opening track, a song Jenkins composed (so the liner notes inform readers) at a summer camp in Palatine, Illinois, “where she had her first musical experience with children—leading them in community songs” (Jenkins 1957). The track begins with a spoken introduction in which Jenkins explains, in a serene voice, the “rules” of the game to her audience. As in the children’s game Follow the Leader, she says, the rules of her “game in song and sound” are simple:

I simply sing or speak a line to you and you sing it back to me, unless I instruct you to do something different. If I make a funny sound, you make one also. Sometimes I sing softly, sometimes loudly, sometimes fast, sometimes slow. Whatever I do, you must follow. Remember, now, it’s awfully important to listen. (Jenkins 1957)

After asking the children to follow her in saying “Tahboo,” Jenkins begins the song by tapping out a brief rhythmic pattern on a conga drum, then layering vocals over the beat. Jenkins provides a transcription of these vocal sounds in her liner notes:

Leader: Tahboo – oo – oo
Group: Tahboo – oo – oo
Leader: Ee pah – ah – ah
Group: Ee pah – ah – ah
Leader: Ee wahtah wahtah wahtah yeegah
(yea rhymes with say)
Group: Ee wahtah wahtah wahtah yeegah
(Jenkins 1957)

The performance is divided into three sections: a first which is sung, a second that omits some of the drumming and incorporates spoken versions of some of the same sounds, and a third that reprises elements of the first, albeit with subtle modulations in tempo and intensity, eventually fading out at the end.

Although “Tahboo” is brief—about 75 seconds, not including Jenkins’ spoken introduction—the experience it engenders is immersive. Because the sounds are unfamiliar, the children (and the audience listening to the LP) have to pay careful attention to them, and because Jenkins does not present them as *words* but rather as “made-up sounds,” they (we) must approach them as “pure” auditory material. Even minor variations in Jenkins’ vocal delivery thus stand out as differences that must be vocalized back to her. If she vocalizes the made-up sound “ee pah” in a staccato fashion, the children have to make a staccato sound as well; if she whispers, they whisper back.

Yet even as these sounds are presented to the children as fanciful, Jenkins’ careful transcription of them—including her parenthetical observation that the *yea* sound of “yeagah” rhymes with the English word “say”—suggests that the sonic text is neither random nor nonsensical, but meaningful, albeit not in a strictly semantic sense. Indeed, although Jenkins never identifies the musical inspiration for “Tahboo” in the 1957 liner notes (as she would in 1995), in her choice of instrumentation, rhythmic accompaniment, and the quality of the sounds (understood as phonemic approximations of words) an astute listener can deduce that she is drawing on African source material—an impression supported by her description of her method of composing based on “interpretations” of learned material. In other words, “Tahboo” models African musicking even as Jenkins does not identify the song as “African,” translate or explicate the lyric, or specify its provenance in a particular region, country, ethnic group, or language. The transmission of musical knowledge in the song thus does not rest on the children’s mastery of its *meaning*—understood as content conveyed by its lyrics, or even as basic recognition of the lyrics as words from a foreign tongue—but flows from their embodied performance of different musical practices and aesthetics.

Like Jenkins’ signature composition, “You’ll Sing a Song and I’ll Sing a Song” (1966), “Tahboo” is about human communication, affirming the production of community through song. Rooted in Jenkins’ political investments in racial and gender equality, it affirms the social value of listening, not as a form of obedience and deference—as in, “stop talking and listen”—but as a sonic affirmation of connectivity and regard for the other. Yet Jenkins does not present “Tahboo” as a political song, at least not in the sense of movement anthems such as “This Little Light of Mine,” a child-friendly spiritual that had been taken up by civil rights activists by 1957. The subtlety of her approach is such that “Tahboo” might be heard and reproduced in classrooms without regard for its “multicultural” subtext, as a simple “game in song” with “made-up sounds.” Other listeners, more

attuned to such subtexts, might value it precisely for its modeling of an aesthetic that crossed the Atlantic Ocean with enslaved West African peoples, becoming the basis for much American popular song.

Other tracks on *Call-and-Response Rhythmic Group Singing* evidence Jenkins' political and aesthetic commitments differently. Of these, the most noteworthy is "An American Chain Gang Chant," her title for a version of "Another Man Done Gone," an African American folk song that was popular during the folk revival. In narrating the story of a chain-gang escapee from the viewpoint of someone who still toils in servitude, "An American Chain Gang Chant" would at first seem like a strange selection for a children's album. Yet similar to "Moon Don't Go," the other English-language track on *Call-and-Response Rhythmic Group Singing*, "An American Chain Gang Chant" supports multiple readings.

Jenkins may well have known Odetta's spare arrangement of "Another Man Done Gone," which appeared in a live version on her 1954 *The Tin Angel* LP (released with the singer Larry Mohr) and was featured again in a studio version on *Odetta Sings Ballads and Blues* (1957). Odetta's source for the song was an acappella version performed by Alabama native Vera Hall, an "untrained" (in Jenkins' sense) African American singer who sung it in 1940 for folklorist Alan Lomax, after initially objecting that as a blues the song belonged in her husband's repertoire.¹⁰ As Stephen Wade recounts in *The Beautiful Music All Around Us*, Hall may well have learned the song from her husband, who spent time in and out of Alabama penitentiaries. Yet her version is nevertheless imbued with the weariness and fortitude of a woman who is intimately familiar with enchainment and servitude (Wade 2012, 170). It consists of six stanzas, each repeating a single phrase (with subtle variations) four times:

Another man done gone (x4)
I didn't know his name (x4)
He had a long chain on (x4)
He killed another man (x4)
I don't know where he's gone (x4)
I'm gonna walk your log (x4)
(adapted from Wade 1997, 169)

On Jenkins' album, "An American Chain Gang Chant" combines elements of both of these earlier recordings of "Another Man Done Gone" by black women, and it likewise conjures escapes both real and hoped-for, of the past and of the future. Chanted and sung in unison with the children, it uses hand claps and sleigh bells (the latter conjuring the metallic clank

of heavy chains) as rhythmic accompaniment. The violent lyrical content of the song is downplayed in Jenkins' liner notes, which omit the lyrics and define "chain gang" in simple, racially and culturally non-specific terms, as "a group of prisoners who eat, work, and sleep chained together."¹¹ Her version also adds a new stanza that gives the song a sense of hopefulness ("They'll never catch him") and, by changing the line "He killed another man" from earlier recorded versions to "They shot (killed) another man," conveys a moral clarity that children can appreciate. (The runaway is not a "bad guy" who killed someone.) Yet a sense of the chain gang's brutality is retained in the indeterminacy of the plural pronoun "they" in the rewritten lyric, suggesting a figure of authority, whether individual or collective, that is all the more ominous and powerful for not being specifically named.

"The song is full of shadows and hidden meanings," observed Lomax, referring to Hall's "Another Man Done Gone," in notes written for the Library of Congress's Archive of American Folk Song. Lomax was perhaps thinking of the enigmatic last line of Hall's version ("I'm gonna walk your log," said to be a metaphor for a woman's fidelity); or he may have been commenting on its uncanny power in conjuring escape and fugitivity as themes of African American experience.¹² But it is unlikely that Lomax, in his avid pursuit of the "rich" veins of folklore that existed in rural Southern communities, had ever contemplated "Another Man Done Gone" as a children's song. Ironically, when Alan Lomax and his father, John Lomax, first began hawking the talents of their "discovery" Lead Belly (then Huddie Ledbetter), they were not averse to publicity that referred to him as the "singing convict." Upon the release of *Play Parties in Song and Dance*, Asch is said to have quipped: "Who heard of a murderer singing play party songs?" (Carlin 2008, 136). Of course, Lead Belly—as a black man who actually had escaped from a chain gang—could not have recorded a chain gang song or a murder ballad for children. But Jenkins could and did, conjuring both the fugitivity of the chain gang escapee and the fugitivity of cultural memory of African American history and experience, which must be actively transmitted from generation to generation. Even in its "child-friendly" form, that is to say, her choice of "Another Man Done Gone" suggests a desire to call attention to the sorts of cultural memories and "alternative histories" (Mohanty 2003, 196) that even progressive schooling can elide.

In her liner notes to the 1995 *Multicultural Children's Music* compilation, Jenkins discussed diversity in children's music without ever using the word "multicultural." "It is never too early to teach children about different ways of speaking, different rhythms, and different ways of moving their bodies," she observes. "In this collection of songs children will learn new words and hear new sounds and rhythms from different places. They

will discover that although some things are different, many things are the same.” This might seem like a tepid platitude of diversity—of the sort associated with late twentieth-century corporate or bureaucratic multiculturalism—but read with an awareness of Jenkins’ longstanding educational and archival project, it can be seen as connecting the dots between diversity in repertoire and the critique of racializing nationalist projects of identity. Difference can be part of a normalizing project that ultimately reinscribes hierarchies, in effect reproducing the logic of difference that “difference” would seem to disavow (Mohanty 2003; Puar 2017; Hall 2000). My goal in characterizing Jenkins’ project as a black feminist democratic practice has thus not been to resuscitate the term “multicultural” for Jenkins’ music, but to call attention to the ways her work—in its critique of hierarchical discourses of cultural “knowledge,” anti-essentialist methodologies of cultural representation, and surfacing of subjugated memories and histories through song—is more expansive and incisive than the label has come to imply. As those in the 1950s folk revival expressed their own “searching for international harmony and understanding” (Cohen 2002, 110) through an embrace of the internationalism of folksong, so Jenkins, in her children’s music, imagined a means of instilling a democratic ethos in children that would nurture them throughout their adult lives. In the beautiful world her music conjures, we respond to each other’s calls. Or as Jenkins herself said: “Whatever I do, you must follow. Remember, now, it’s awfully important to listen.”

Notes

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1. Whereas it originally appeared on Jenkins’ 1957 LP *Call-and-Response Rhythmic Group Singing* as “Tah-boo,” on *Multicultural Children’s Songs*, the same song is spelled “Tahboo.” I will use the more recent spelling of “Tahboo” throughout this essay.
2. Writing about her 1979 Folkways release “Travellin’ with Ella Jenkins: A Bi-lingual Journey,” a reviewer for *Sing Out!*, the folk music magazine, noted: “Thirty years ago [1949], terms like ‘bi-lingual’ and ‘multi-cultural’ were seldom used. But many school children have been ‘culturally deprived,’ forbidden to speak their native languages in school. The kind of cross-cultural approach Ella Jenkins employs not only helps children achieve a good self-image, but encourages them to appreciate the customs and languages of their

friends.” See Vincent 1979: 41.

3. I draw here, too, on a phone interview with Tony Seeger, February 19, 2018.
4. Chicago-based filmmaker Tim Ferrin is currently completing a documentary about Jenkins, *Ella Jenkins: We'll Sing a Song Together*. See <http://www.singasongtogether.com>.
5. I am thinking here, for example, of the 2011 “Wisconsin Uprising,” in which public employees, including teachers, fought back against Gov. Scott Walker’s plan to roll back collective bargaining and cut pensions. See Stein and Marley 2013.
6. David Blake has recently documented how college campuses also served as “crucial sites for demonstrating the democratic potential of folk music.” See Blake 2018.
7. This account draws on various public sources as well as from an author interview with Ella Jenkins and Bernadelle Richter, December 17, 2018.
8. The Little Red School House was founded by progressive educator Elisabeth Irwin in 1921 as an alternative public elementary school. Beginning in 1941, it became an independent (i.e., privately funded) school.
9. In 1937, *Life* published an article that stands out for its racist characterization of the artist. See “Lead Belly: Bad Nigger Makes Good Minstrel,” *Life* (April 19, 1937), 38-40.
10. Hall’s version, which played on Lomax’s *Ballad Hunter* radio show and released on the album *Afro-American Blues and Games Songs* (AAFS L4), subsequently became the basis for versions by Carl Sandburg (published in *New American Songbag* [1950]), Johnny Cash (1963), Harry Belafonte (*Swing Dat Hammer*, 1960), and Odetta (1954).
11. Given the age of the school children and the population that Howalton served, it stands to reason that Jenkins taught the performers more about the history of the song and the specific penal subjugation it represents.
12. Wade likewise finds that Hall’s plaintive blues “conveys a message akin to a civil rights anthem” (2012, 172).

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