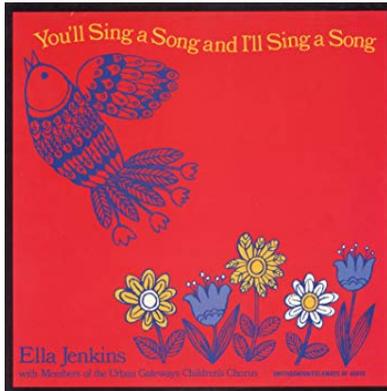


“You’ll Sing a Song and I’ll Sing a Song”—Ella Jenkins (1966)

Added to the National Registry: 2007

Essay by Gayle Wald (guest essay)*



Original album cover



Original label



Ella Jenkins

“You’ll Sing a Song and I’ll Sing a Song” is the signature composition of Ella Jenkins (b. 1924), the most prolific and influential American children’s musician of the late 20th century. The lead track of Jenkins’s 1966 album of the same name, it has remained a perennial favorite of children and adults over generations, acquiring status as a classic work.

As a recording, “You’ll Sing a Song and I’ll Sing a Song” is important both for its enduring popularity and as an expression of Jenkins’s hallmark methodology of nurturing children’s musicality through “call-and-response rhythmic group singing,” a technique that emphasizes their capacity to learn through imitation and repetition. As the phrase “You’ll Sing a Song and I’ll Sing a Song” suggests, for Jenkins, music is at its essence about human communication and human relationship. When “you” sing a song and “I” follow, we engage in a musical dialogue. When we sing a song *together*, we affirm the social and cultural value of listening to each other.

Like much of Jenkins’s work, “You’ll Sing a Song and I’ll Sing a Song” is self-produced and features Jenkins performing with a group of children—in this case, the members of the children’s chorus of Urban Gateways, a Chicago-based arts education organization with which Jenkins has periodically collaborated. The song begins with a simple melodic refrain sung by Jenkins, who accompanies herself on baritone ukulele, followed by a repetition of this refrain, with the children joining in:

*You’ll sing a song
And I’ll sing a song
Then we’ll sing a song together*

*You'll sing a song
And I'll sing a song
In warm or wintry weather*

Subsequent verses are all variations on this theme, adding or subtracting simple instrumental embellishment and alternating lyrics (e.g. “You’ll whistle a while/And I’ll whistle a while”; “You’ll hum a line/And I’ll hum a line”) which are also cues to varying styles of vocalization. As the leader, Jenkins begins each refrain, but after the first repetition, the children, who now understand the pattern of call-and-response, join in almost immediately.

Because of its simplicity and elasticity, the recorded version of “You’ll Sing a Song and I’ll Sing a Song” is thus not a definitive statement, but rather one version of a song with infinite variations, each suiting the needs of the performers. Moreover, “You’ll Sing a Song” is self-perpetuating, in the sense that once participants--whether children or adults--learn how to follow the leader, they are equipped to become leaders of subsequent performances. As Jenkins’s wrote in her liner notes for the 1966 album, “The song should create a happy mood. It’s an easy one to involve both children and adults. The more you sing it, the more you should feel a part of it.”

Encouraging children to “feel a part of” songs—that is, demystifying early musical education by shifting the emphasis from mastery of texts to accessible modes of human communication and expression—has been Jenkins’s lifelong project as a composer and recording artist. “You’ll Sing a Song and I’ll Sing a Song” exemplifies an approach to children’s music she had been advancing since her 1957 Folkways debut, “Call-and-Response Rhythmic Group Singing.” On that album, which contained tracks based in different languages, cultures, and nationalities, Jenkins emphasized “call-and-response” as an inclusive and democratic musical aesthetic.

Jenkins had found inspiration for her method as a child growing up in Chicago’s predominantly African American South Side in the 1930s and 1940, amid a rich musical environment that included everything from black church music and black girls’ handclapping and chanting games to Cab Calloway’s “hi-dee-ho” theatrics (which left a deep impression after Jenkins saw him perform at the city’s Regal Theater). It was also echoed in the group-performance aesthetic of Chicago’s burgeoning post-war folk music scene, of which she would become an active member, befriending musicians such as Odetta, Big Bill Broonzy, and Brother John Sellers.

Although Jenkins had been recording on Folkways for almost a decade before the release of “You’ll Sing a Song and I’ll Sing a Song,” the popularity of the album’s title track was not foreordained. Since she had signed to Moe Asch’s imprint, Jenkins had been tenaciously promoting her LPs through performances, school visits, and professional conferences. Early in her career, for example, Jenkins would offer to conduct a workshop for elementary-level school teachers in return for their school’s purchase of one or two of her LPs. By teaching teachers, in other words, Jenkins ensured that

material like “You’ll Sing a Song and I’ll Sing a Song” would have a musical half-life beyond its recorded form as teachers taught their own variations of the work to students.

By the time of its addition to the Library of Congress’s National Recording Registry in 2007, “You’ll Sing a Song and I’ll Sing a Song” had been passed down intergenerationally, sometimes by adults who had first heard the song in childhood, and were now sharing it with children in their own lives. Meanwhile, Jenkins’s impressive body of work for Folkways has earned her national plaudits, including a Grammy Association Lifetime Achievement Award (2004) and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (1999), the first such award given by ASCAP to a children’s musician and to a woman.

Jenkins’s recording of “You’ll Sing a Song and I’ll Sing a Song” additionally sustained and continues to sustain Folkways, the catalog of which was acquired by the Smithsonian Institute in 1989. Although folk singers such as Pete Seeger and Woody Guthrie are perhaps the label’s most celebrated artists, the longevity of Asch’s enterprise is due in no small part to Jenkins, who through tracks like “You’ll Sing a Song and I’ll Sing a Song,” has taught generations of children and adults to sing a song together.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.