

2009 RALPH RINZLER MEMORIAL CONCERT: A Tribute to Ella Jenkins

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There is no better time, no better place to celebrate the cultures of the American people and those from around the world than at the Folklife Festival on the National Mall.—Ralph Rinzler (1934–1994)

Ralph Rinzler co-founded the Smithsonian Folklife Festival in 1967 and a decade later parlayed it into what is now the Smithsonian Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage. An old-time music performer, traditional crafts savant, and social activist, he worked to support and make visible the genius of grassroots communities throughout the United States and around the globe. He believed deeply in equality among cultures and likened the Festival to a “declaration of cultural independence,” a public platform on which each tradition might be honored, understood, and celebrated. A man of enormous vision, tireless creativity, and boundless energy, Rinzler put into place the “DNA” that infuses the Center’s egalitarian philosophy, can-do spirit, and dedication to public impact.

The annual Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert showcases and offers tribute to artists who, like Rinzler, have wielded major cultural influence. This year, we salute Smithsonian Folklife artist Ella Jenkins. Jenkins earned her reputation as “The First Lady of Children’s Music” through her fifty-plus years of creating and performing groundbreaking music for young children. She published the first of her nearly forty albums for children (and parents) in 1957 on the Folkways Records label in New York City. She went on to become the role model and inspiration for most of

the renowned leaders of children’s music who followed. In 2004, she became the first children’s artist to receive the music industry’s highest honor, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences Lifetime Achievement GRAMMY award. Similarly, the ASCAP Foundation honored her with its Lifetime Achievement Award in 1999, making her the first woman and the first children’s artist to be recognized with this national prize.

Ella Jenkins has won dozens of other awards, including multiple GRAMMY nominations, many Parents’ Choice honors, the 2003 Chicago Heroes Award from the Chicago GRAMMY Chapter, the Sydney R. Yates Arts Advocacy Lifetime Achievement Award, an “Ella Jenkins Day” proclamation from the Mayor of Chicago, the Service to Young Children Award from the Chicago Association for the Education of Young Children, multiple Director’s Choice awards from “Early Childhood News,” the Zora Neale Hurston “Keepers of the Culture” Award from the National Association of Black Storytellers, and designation as “One of Chicago’s Living Treasures.” She has appeared many times on the television shows *Barney & Friends* and *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. Earlier in her career, with her program on local Chicago television, she most likely was the first African American woman to have her own show in a major media market. In 2006, Strathmore Hall in Bethesda, Maryland, produced a sold-out tribute concert to Jenkins, featuring marquee-name artists Pete Seeger, Bill Harley, Cathy Fink and Marcy Marxer, Mariachi Los Camperos, and Sweet Honey in the Rock. We welcome Ella Jenkins as the 2009 Ralph Rinzler Memorial Concert honoree.

Ella Jenkins (center), Folkways artist for more than forty years, mingles with her fans during a special tribute to her career at the 2007 Smithsonian Folklife Festival. Photo by Jeff Tinsley, courtesy of Smithsonian Institution