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Smithsonian Libraries and Archives and the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage Unveil "Music HerStory"

The Smithsonian Libraries and Archives and the Smithsonian's Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage open a new exhibition, "[Music HerStory: Women and Music of Social Change](#)" at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History June 22. "Music HerStory" will be on display through Feb. 20, 2024.

Women's leadership in music and social change is central to the American story. From people's earliest musical encounters to the formation of complex social identities, the American musical landscape would not be what it is today without the countless contributions of women changemakers, groundbreakers and tradition-bearers. "Music HerStory" explores these contributions through unique media collections from Smithsonian Libraries and Archives, the Center for Folklife and Culture Heritage and around the Smithsonian.

The exhibition, presented in both Spanish and English, will feature Ella Jenkins, an award-winning musician whose songbooks have taught children about a diversity of cultures and languages for over 50 years; Sister Rosetta Tharpe, the "Godmother of Rock 'n' Roll" and a pioneer of spiritual music; Lucy McKim Garrison, an abolitionist musicologist who documented African American music in the 1800s; Queen Lili'uokalani, the last sovereign monarch of Hawai'i, who was a gifted and prolific composer; and singers Dolly Parton, Kitty Wells and Loretta Lynn, who shaped the country music genre.

"With more than 16,000 musical instruments, 100,000 pages of sheet music, 80,000 recorded music tracks, hundreds of books and hundreds of musical activities annually, the Smithsonian is among the world's largest museums of music," said Meredith Holmgren, curator of American women's music and this exhibition. "And yet, many of these musical resources remain unknown to the public. This is especially true for our music collections that relate to women's history. Women have made incredible contributions to the history of music and social change. We are delighted to bring many of these stories to life in the exhibition."

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“Music HerStory” tells the powerful stories of women who used music to challenge gender stereotypes; bring forth revolutionary self-expression; reimagine political and social change; push boundaries for the labor movement, women’s health and education; and deliver victories for temperance and suffrage activism. Objects on display include the Jean Ritchie’s dulcimer made by George Pickow (Viper, Kentucky, 1951), Elizabeth Cotten’s *Folksongs and Instrumentals with Guitar* (Folkways Records, 1958), Lydia Mendoza’s *La Gloria de Texas* (Arhoolie Records, 1980), Gustavus D. Pike’s *The Jubilee Singers, and Their Campaign for Twenty Thousand Dollars* (Boston and New York, 1873) and riot grrrl zines of the 1990s.

“We are thrilled to present women movers and shakers who forever altered the course of American music,” said Tamar Evangelestia-Dougherty, director of the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives. “We honor their drive, their creativity, their advocacy and their achievement, painting a portrait of their long-standing influence through Smithsonian collections.”

From Mother Goose to Girl Power, Prohibition to the civil rights movement, women have made their voices heard in the story of American music. Through rare and unique books, photographs, albums and recordings, “Music HerStory” captures their innovative contributions and courageous spirit.

Support

“Music HerStory” received support from the Smithsonian American Women’s History Initiative. Special thanks to The Arhoolie Foundation and the DC Public Library.

Programs

Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, Smithsonian Libraries and Archives and the Smithsonian’s American Women’s History Initiative co-present “Folkways @ Folklife: Alice Gerrard and Leyla McCalla,” an event in conjunction with the exhibition, Friday, June 24, at 7 p.m. on the Rinzler Stage at the [Smithsonian Folklife Festival](#) on the National Mall. Visit the [event page](#) for more details.

Additional public programs accompanying the exhibition will engage diverse audiences from K–12 to adult, including workshops, lectures and hands-on sessions.

About the Smithsonian Libraries and Archives

The [Smithsonian Libraries and Archives](#) is an international system of 21 library branches and an institutional archives. It maintains a collection of nearly 3 million volumes and 44,000 cubic feet of archival materials. The Libraries and Archives serves as an educational resource for the Smithsonian

Institution, the global research community and the public. Locations are in Washington, D.C., Maryland, Virginia, New York City and the Republic of Panama.

About the Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage

The [Center for Folklife and Cultural Heritage](#) uses the power of culture to increase understanding, strengthen communities and reinforce our shared humanity through rigorous research, educational programming and community engagement. Through the [Smithsonian Folklife Festival](#), [Smithsonian Folkways Recordings](#), exhibitions, documentary films and videos, symposia, publications and educational materials, the center works to sustain traditional and expressive culture such as music, language and craft in a wide variety of locations around the world.

About the Smithsonian American Women’s History Initiative

The [Smithsonian American Women’s History Initiative](#), “Because of Her Story,” is one of the country’s most ambitious undertakings to research, collect, document, display and share the rich, complete and compelling story of women in America. Launched in 2018, the initiative seeks to create a more equitable and just American society by creating, educating, disseminating and amplifying the historical record of the accomplishments of American women. More information about the initiative, including exhibitions and public programs, is available online at womenshistory.si.edu.

Note to editors: Selected images from “Music HerStory” [may be downloaded](#). For further information about the exhibition, visit the “Music HerStory” bilingual [website](#).

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