

**GAYLA  
RIENETTE  
PEEVEY**  
**1943-**



**CHRISTMAS  
SONG  
STILL A  
CLASSIC!**

In 2018 the Oklahoma Music Hall of Fame's announced their list of inductees – with women making up the entire list! It included early rock-and-roll musician Lorrie Collins, country music record producer Gail Davies, teacher-composer Evelyn LaRue Pittman, country singer Molly Bee and 1950s child singer Gayla Peevey.

Gayla Rienette Peevey was a child star who was born in March 1943 in Oklahoma City. In 1953, ten-year-old Gayla, who now lived in Ponca City, recorded the Christmas novelty song “I Want a Hippopotamus for Christmas”, which was written by John Rox in 1950. When released nationally by Columbia Records, the song shot to the top of the charts. Gayla performed the song on “The Ed Sullivan Show” on November 15, 1953.

Because the Oklahoma City Zoo needed a hippo at the time, they capitalized upon the popularity of the song by putting together a major media blitz asking kids to send in nickels and dimes “to buy Gayla a hippo”. The fund raised \$3,000, and on Christmas Eve 1953, Gayla received Mathilda, a Nile hippo, which she donated to the zoo. Mathilda lived there for the next 45 years.

Gayla went on to record other children's songs for Columbia, including a duet with Columbia's other child singer Jimmy Boyd. In 1959, Gayla Peevey adopted the pseudonym Jamie Horton, recording for Joy Records. In 1960, “My Little Marine” climbed the Billboard charts and “Robot Man” was popular in Australia, and later recorded by Connie Francis.

Peevey graduated from San Diego State University with a Bachelor of Education degree. She married Cliff Henderson in August 1963 and had one child. She eventually left teaching and ran her own advertising firm for fifteen years in the San Diego area.

In January 1998, Mathilda and Norman, a 30-year-old male hippo, planned to retire at Disney's Animal Kingdom Theme Park in Orlando. Together, they had produced nine offspring. The Oklahoma City Zoo staff said the two would enjoy the park because it simulated their natural environment.

Norman made the trip successfully in mid-February but Mathilda died of heart failure during the 36-hour journey in March. According to Zoo director Stephen Wylie, she was healthy enough to make the trip. She hadn't had any medical problems for the past five years. "Obviously, if I thought she couldn't make the trip, I would have kept her here."

In December 2017, 73-year-old Peevey was again present when the Oklahoma City Zoo acquired a rare 26-year-old pygmy hippopotamus (an endangered species with 3,000 still in existence) named Francesca from the San Diego Zoo. She joined 43-year-old Wolee in the zoo's pachyderm exhibit.

You can still hear Peevey's song in the aisles of Hallmark each Christmas. It remains one of their most popular ornaments. Even the U. S. Postal Service used the song for their 2016 Christmas ad campaign. The song, which climbed to #24 on the Billboard chart, still plays on the radio sixty years after its debut which Peevey called “an unexpected blessing”.