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Preface to the Second Edition (1990)

When John Jacob Niles wrote the preface to the 1975 edition of the songs and concluded it with the poem, "When I am just a whisper in the wind…," he was perhaps foreseeing this enlarged 1990 edition of his work. The poem ends with the lines, "…Even then my song will swirl and spin. And find men's hearts rest therein…"

John Jacob Niles's concert career ended in 1978 and he died in 1980, but the singer Jacqueline Roberts (with Nancie Field as her accompanist) appeared in many of his concerts during the last dozen years of his stage career and has continued to sing his music on the concert stages of America. Many of these performances are made up entirely of the music of John Jacob Niles. Only rarely does she make an appearance without featuring at least one of his songs.

This new enlarged publication contains all the songs in the 1975 publication, plus eight more. These eight are among the ones that Jacqueline Roberts has found most effective and which her audiences have liked best. The 1990 edition has had the benefit of her many years of experience with the Niles catalogue, and she has also been most generous of her time in reading the early proofs.

Rena Niles

Preface to the Revised and Expanded Edition (2015)

In the forty years since the first publication of *The Songs of John Jacob Niles*, Niles's legacy has received a boost from increased scholarship on American folk and popular music. The University of Kentucky named their American music archive and library after him, the John Jacob Niles Center for American Music, and in 2010 the first full-length biography of Niles, *I Wonder as I Wander* written by musicologist Ron Pen, was released. The book sheds new light on Niles's importance in influencing the folk revivals of the 1950s and 60s, raising the profile of his significant contribution to trends in twentieth century American music.

The beauty and powerful emotion behind Niles's songs contain a timelessness that also speaks for itself. The mournful heartbreak in "Go 'way from my window," or the Americana evident in the pastoral simplicity of "Evening" hold something to which singers and listeners alike can relate. The second edition of *The Songs of John Jacob Niles* (1990) added eight new tunes, including "My Lover is a farmer lad," "The Wild Rider," "Ribbon Bow," "Little Black Star," "The Robin and the Thorn," "Unused I am to lovers," "When I get up into Heaven," and "The Flower of Jesse."

This new revised edition, released for the fortieth anniversary of the original, contains eleven additional beloved songs. These songs include "The Blue Madonna," "Calm is the Night," "Careless Love," "Reward," "Wayfaring Stranger," as well as six songs from Niles's *Appalachian Carols:* "The Cherry-Tree," "Lulle Lullay," "Down in yon forest," "Jesus the Christ is born," "The Seven Joys of Mary," and "See Jesus the Saviour."

John Jacob Niles (1892–1980)

Singer, composer, and folk song collector John Jacob Niles has influenced generations of musicians in America. His collections and transcriptions of folk music helped inspire the folk revival movement of the 1950s and 60s. Joan Baez, and Peter, Paul & Mary were some of the artists associated with the folk revival who performed his songs. Unlike other collectors active in the 1930s, Niles was driven not so much by a desire to preserve as to obtain inspiration for his own performances and compositions, and although his fieldwork collections took place in the 30s, he refrained from publishing much of what he collected, or waited until the 1960s to do so. His own compositions, influenced by the Appalachian folk music that permeated his environs since childhood, became part of the folk music canon and continue to be performed by folk artists and classical singers today.

Niles was born in Lexington, Kentucky. When he was twelve, his family moved to a farm in Jefferson County. His father taught John folk ballads and took him to visit with local musicians. His mother was a church organist who taught her son to read and transcribe music. It was as a teenager that Niles began collecting and transcribing folk songs. The first ballad he collected was "Young Beichan," which he heard from Granny Cilla Baker in Red Bird Creek, Kentucky, at the age of fifteen. At sixteen he wrote his first song, "Go 'way from my window." The lyrics were based on a song fragment he heard from a man Niles refers to as a "Negro ditch-digger known as Objerall Jacket."[1] The song became popular, and was eventually recorded by artists such as Marlene Dietrich.

Niles enlisted in the U.S. Army Signal Corps during World War I. While serving as a reconnaissance pilot, he continued to collect folk songs from other soldiers, the results of which he eventually published in *Singing Soldiers* (1927) and *Songs My Mother Never Taught Me* (1929). At the war's conclusion, Niles remained in France for a time, studying in Lyon and Paris. He returned to the United States to attend the Cincinnati Conservatory and sang with the Lyric Opera in Chicago before moving to New York in 1925. There he published a number of books in addition to the aforementioned soldier collections, including *Impressions of a Negro Camp Meeting* (1925) and *Seven Kentucky Mountain Songs* (1928). He used his knowledge of African American and Appalachian repertoire to arrange works for the contralto Marion Kerby on her international tours between 1929 and 1933. Also during this time, he travelled with the photographer Doris Ulmann throughout the Appalachian Mountains, collecting material that would eventually make up his *Ballad Book* (1961), the culmination of his fieldwork between 1905 and 1936.

In addition to collecting traditional folk tunes, Niles wrote original songs, as in the case of "Go 'way from my window." He was inspired in his writing by romantic nationalism and believed in the each individual's right to find resonance in the music and art of "the race in which they belong."[2] His music was uniquely American in its combination of centuries of English and European song with revival hymns and African American folk songs, spirituals, and stylistic inflection.

Niles also enjoyed a successful singing career, performing at Carnegie Hall, the White House, and the Newport Folk Festival and releasing numerous albums on RCA, Folkways, and other labels. His compositional output, in addition to his over six hundred songs and arrangements, included an opera, a symphony, cantatas, and an oratorio. In 1936, he married the journalist Rena Lipetz and moved to a farm near Lexington, Kentucky.

[1] "Folk Inspiration: John Jacob Niles on collecting, composing, and performing his classic folk songs," accessed December 1, 2014, http://www.john-jacob-niles.com/media.htm.

[2] Ron Pen, *I Wonder as Wander: The Life of John Jacob Niles* (Lexington, KY: The University of Kentucky Press, 2010), Overture page 1.

THE FLOWER OF JESSE

Words and Music by
John Jacob Niles



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GO 'WAY FROM MY WINDOW

Words and Music by
John Jacob Niles
Arranged by the composer



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I WONDER AS I WANDER

(Appalachian Carol)

Collected, adapted, and arranged by
John Jacob Niles



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DOWN IN YON FOREST

Adapted and arranged for voice and piano by
Bryan Stanley

Collected and arranged by
John Jacob Niles



*a mattress of straw

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