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John Jacob Niles

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March I regard warmly, since I was born into it in the thirties—at a time when John Jacob Niles had already finished his most important ballad collecting efforts. And so I always look forward to its first day. March 1, 1980, however, was quite unwelcome, beginning with snow, gusts, and bitter cold. And in the afternoon a telephone call informed me that John Jacob Niles had died during the morning. Suddenly his unique presence was lost. He was an old man, yes, and old men die; but this old man was special—I knew I would not see his like again.

For when Johnnie Niles died we Americans lost more than our foremost folksinger. Most widely renowned as a balladeer, he was a compelling performer who created an immediate intimacy with his audience. But he was also a composer whose best works are likely to remain popular for generations to come. And he was a woodcarver, dulcimer maker, painter, poet, farmer, raconteur, author, and entertainer who described himself as “just a Boone Creek boy.” He was, in fact, a most rare man.

Born in Louisville, Kentucky, on 28 April 1892, John Jacob Niles grew up in an emergent United States, beginning to flex its muscles as a world power, increasingly interested in its past heritage and its future purposes. He belonged to a generation indebted to a robust past but obliged to articulate an unpredictable modernity. Virtually alone among that generation, Johnnie Niles set out to bring us knowledge of our rich heritage of folk music, representing a continuity that stretches from America’s origins up to the very present.

John Jacob Niles was perhaps ideally suited for such an undertaking. His father wore many hats—farmer, politician, businessman, folksinger, square dance caller—and he passed on to Johnnie his philosophic views and his interest in people. His mother was a pianist and church organist, granddaughter of a piano maker.
Both parents instilled in Johnnie musical knowledge, and encouraged his instruction in piano. In addition, his early life combined the experiences of both an Ohio River city and a small farm—a valuable inheritance of urban and rustic ways.

At the age of fifteen Johnnie began to record in a notebook the folk songs of the Ohio Valley. After graduating from high school in 1909 he went to work for the Burroughs Adding Machine Company as a machine repairman, and from then until 1917 his work took him throughout eastern Kentucky. On these travels he visited folksingers of varied sorts, copying down the songs and tunes they rendered for him. These eight years constituted the first period of his collecting of folk music. Already he had done some composing and had made some appearances as a pianist accompanying singing groups. In 1907 he had composed “Go ‘Way from My Window,” based on a fragment of a work song he heard repetitiously intoned by a fellow workman employed on his father’s farm. But the girl for whom it was created was unimpressed, and he laid the song aside in his piano bench. It would emerge many years later to become one of his most famous and popular compositions. At the time, however, his future course in performing and composition was not at all clear.

Thus 1917 was a fateful year for John Jacob Niles and his career. He enlisted in the aviation section of the Army Signal Corps and went off to serve in World War I as a pilot in France. He made numerous reconnaissance flights. During one assignment his plane crashed, leaving him with extensive and near fatal injuries. For him the war ended in hospitalization and convalescence. Afterwards he took advantage of opportunities offered by the Army and studied music at the Université de Lyon and the Schola Cantorum in Paris. Upon returning to the United States, he completed his musical education at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. Thus he was equipped to bring to the study of folk music the expertise of formal training in musicology and applied music.

Like many young men with artistic interests, he went to New York City to seek his fortune. In the early twenties he served as master of ceremonies at the Silver Slipper nightclub. Later in the decade, having already presented many folk song recitals, he teamed up with soprano Marion Kerby to tour the United States and Europe, earning enthusiastic critical attention but hardly financial success. During the twenties he published stories and sketches in *Scribner’s Magazine* and produced three books: *One*
Man's War, a reworked memoir; Singing Soldiers, a study of black soldiers' songs of the war; and Songs My Mother Never Taught Me, a collection of Army songs. It was in this period also that he met photographer Doris Ulmann. From 1928 through 1934, the year of Miss Ulmann's death, they made numerous trips in the Appalachian region of Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, Tennessee, and North Carolina. This was the second period of Johnnie's folk song collecting, and the period in which Miss Ulmann made some of her finest photographic works.

In 1936 Johnnie married Rena Lipetz and in 1937 returned to his native Kentucky, there from 1939 on to reside at Boot Hill Farm beside Boone Creek in Clark County. But his return was not retirement. During the 1940s and thereafter he was presenting fifty recitals per year, and by 1950 he had sung in every state of the Union, the Canadian provinces, and many of the nations of Europe. Meanwhile he was housebuilder, farmer, parent, composer, and arranger. He had composed “I Wonder As I Wander,” the tune of “Black Is the Color of My True Love’s Hair,” “Venezuela,” and “Jesus, Jesus, Rest Your Head”; and he had arranged scores of other songs for solo voice or chorus. Most of these pieces were published by G. Schirmer, Inc. and Carl Fischer, Inc. He recorded many of them on RCA Victor’s Red Seal label. Three of his albums entitled American Folk Lore appeared in 1940.

Until nearly the end of his life John Jacob Niles remained similarly productive—presenting recitals, composing and arranging music, writing poems and his autobiography. During his lifetime he gave well over a thousand performances. In 1950 he completed an oratorio entitled Lamentation and shortly after a choral work entitled Rhapsody for the Merry Month of May. Other longer works followed. But, as his wife Rena judges, he was most skillful at composing shorter works—“the song. This is the thing he has always done best.” And here the triumph of his last years was the 1972 Niles-Merton Song Cycles, in which he set to music twenty-two of the poems of his friend Thomas Merton. In 1961, after years of intermittent work, appeared the culminating effort of his folk-song collecting, The Ballad Book of John Jacob Niles, a compilation of sixty-five ballads with commentaries both about the works and about the folk from whom Johnnie learned them in the Appalachians.

Such is a very brief overview of Johnnie’s work and life. And how are the work and life to be assessed? Most important of all...
Johnnie's achievements surely was his collecting and performing of America's ballads and carols. Folk music scholars and purists sometimes say he made some missteps in his collecting and rendering. Maybe so. But he was a pioneer, breaking the pathway to establish a new settlement, and his achievement must be judged by the development that grew from his initiative. Without his original effort the flourishing of American folksinging that followed in the 1940s and to the present through the performances of scores of balladeers is simply inconceivable. As Ray M. Lawless wrote in 1960, "Of the many singers of folksongs in America today, none more richly deserves the title 'Dean of American Balladeers' [an epithet Time magazine conferred on him]. . . ."1 Johnnie is alleged to have told an interviewer, "I'm the leading folk singer of the Western world, and you might as well admit it. I started the whole thing." Rena Niles, who was present at all of the few interviews Johnnie gave, assures me that he never made such a statement, and no source is ever cited for it. But he could justifiably have done so. No one ever denied that Johnnie was egotistical, but he was deservedly so. For he did "start the whole thing."

His pioneering efforts at collecting were sometimes lucky, sometimes laborious. But it should be remembered that they originated in his intense interest in ordinary people and their music and were conducted at his own expense, with no anticipation of scholarly or financial rewards. His was a labor of love. And he pursued that labor despite adversity. Being young and untraveled, he began collecting, he said, "in a rather timid manner. Furthermore, only a very few people were interested in folklore collecting, and even they thought I was 'quaint and cute.' It was uphill from the beginning."2 Complicating that uphill struggle was a lack of public interest in folk music. Johnnie's own performances and recordings were largely responsible for turning the public disinterestedness into enthusiasm. One of the prices he paid was that imitators began to pirate his works and to treat as public property his original compositions, such as "Go 'Way from My Window" and "Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair." Such piracy was always a very sore point for Johnnie—it cost him both repute and income. It also caused him to put off completion of his ballad book. But his imitators could not equal him. As Charles O'Connell, director of Red Seal records, said, Johnnie was "the unique American troubadour whom no imitator has yet successfully imitated. . . ."3
Nor did imitation dissuade Johnnie from his conviction “that every man, woman, and child on earth had a right to be benefited, inspired, comforted, and assured by contact with the legend, the poetry, the prose writing, and the folk music arising from the language they speak or the race to which they belong.” Better, then, that the songs, carols, and ballads should be performed, even by imitators, than that the public should be denied the opportunity to respond to their appeal and worth.

“I think you can say that Johnnie’s motivation was performance,” Rena Niles says. It was this motive that inspired him to compose his popular original works in the folk song manner, which in turn led to controversy with purists and piracy by imitators. But the motive was correct. Collections, ballad books, scholarly writings are all fine; but they cannot generate popular or widespread interest in folk music. Performance can, as Johnnie well knew from his arduous schedule of recitals. And his performances may very well have been his greatest benefit to folk music. No one who ever saw and heard Johnnie perform could remain indifferent. Most were deeply moved. Some were not, but even they would have had to admit they had seen an extraordinary artist. “For,” as Paul Hume wrote in a retrospect, “Niles occupied the very highest pinnacles of song.”

He attained such stature through both his chosen music and his masterful voice. “He could control his voice flawlessly at every point in its wide range. . . . He could project that tiny thread of a voice in the great reaches of Washington Cathedral, creating a hushed mood. . . . But put him in the intimate confines of the Phillips Collection, and you could feel the warm personal vibrations and that affection with which he regarded every one of his listeners.” It was an unforgettable and incomparable voice. Certainly I never heard another quite like it, including Alfred Deller’s. It was, as one reviewer commented, “a strangely persuasive voice that ranges from a husky whispering baritone to a fragile but beautiful round and limpid falsetto that could match many a coloratura soprano for quality. . . .” But that voice, however extraordinary, was only an instrument. It was Johnnie’s inspiration that made his performances most memorable.

Through that inspiration he could seduce an audience into intimacy with himself. He made love to his audiences, as he did to his dulcimers. He tenderly plucked their strings, eliciting the desired responses from both. Describing an audience reaction to a 1975
concert at the Victor Jory Theatre, William Mootz wrote, "this great old man held them spellbound for 1 1/2 hours. It was an amazing feat. Watching him mold this group to respond to his slightest wish had at least one of his fans in a condition that might best be described as awestruck." His feeling for and his inspiring of his audiences infused Johnnie’s concerts to the very end. Indeed, the finest concert I ever heard him give was among his last, a benefit performance for the University of Kentucky Art Museum in June, 1978.

I never heard him sing again. His last concert was in Swannanoa, North Carolina, in September, 1978. That winter his health began to fail, though fortunately he remained mentally agile. He continued writing and spinning yarns. He delighted in telling tales of past experiences; I never heard a better storyteller. Throughout the summer of 1979 he and Rena and I conferred on the revising and editing of his autobiographical manuscript. Editing that manuscript, of course, increased my admiration and affection for him, as during the last several years of our friendship I had been most taken with Johnnie as a man. Having experienced his singing and his poetry, I felt that he himself had become all the more absorbing. The greatest legacy some persons leave may, after all, be their very living.

Johnnie’s living reflected all the triumphs, shortcomings, loves, foolishness, and intensity that a full-scale life must evidence. He was thoroughly vivacious and had an omnivorous interest in life’s variety. He impassionedly combined lustiness and mysticism, sensuality and romance. His knowledge was broad, ranging from the music of Beethoven and Bach, of course, through opera; the French, German, and Italian languages; the precepts of Zen Buddhism; the philosophy of Heidegger; the history of Europe; the proper way to make compost. He was earthy, temperamental, and cantankerous. Yet he could weep when recalling the music of Scriabin or the ecstasy of a moment of love. In short, his character revealed many disparate and even contradictory qualities combined into a fullness of living.

Johnnie Niles was a genuine, honest-to-God, consummate man. And that is how I will always remember him, long after I find it difficult to recall the exact sound of his voice in concert. For I am ever so much impressed by the enduring legacy of his vital presence—the wonder of a sincere man’s full life, well lived.

Bravo, Johnnie! Bravo!
NOTES

6. Hume.