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I Wonder as I Wander: The Life of John Jacob Niles

Ron Pen

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Louisville native John Jacob Niles (1892–1980) is considered to be one of our nation's most influential musicians. As a composer and balladeer, Niles drew inspiration from the deep well of traditional Appalachian and African American folk songs. At the age of sixteen Niles wrote one of his most enduring tunes, "Go 'Way from My Window," basing it on a song fragment from a black farm worker. This iconic song has been performed by folk artists ever since and may even have inspired the opening line of Bob Dylan's "It Ain't Me Babe."

In *I Wonder as I Wander: The Life of John Jacob Niles*, the first full-length biography of Niles, Ron Pen offers a rich portrait of the musician's character and career. Using Niles's own accounts from his journals, notebooks, and unpublished autobiography, Pen tracks his rise from farm boy to songwriter and folk collector extraordinaire. Niles was especially interested in documenting the voices of his fellow World War I soldiers, the people of Appalachia, and the spirituals of African Americans. In the 1920s he collaborated with noted photographer Doris Ulmann during trips to Appalachia, where he transcribed, adapted, and arranged traditional songs and ballads such as "Pretty Polly" and "Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair."

Niles's preservation and presentation of American folk songs earned him the title of "Dean of American Balladeers," and his theatrical use of the dulcimer is credited with contributing to the popularity of that instrument today. Niles's dedication to the folk music tradition lives on in generations of folk revival artists such as Jean Ritchie, Joan Baez, and Oscar Brand. *I Wonder as I Wander* explores the origins and influences of the American folk music resurgence of the 1950s and 1960s, and finally tells the story of a man at the forefront of that movement.

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