

Class #4 “I Wonder as I Wander”:

One of the finest American folk carols discovered in the 20th century, grew out of three lines of music which were sung without accompaniment by a young girl named Annie Morgan. This story of *I Wonder as I Wander* begins in the town square of Murphy, North Carolina in July of 1933. The story goes that there was a revivalist meeting that day in the town and the Morgan family who were holding the meeting, we're about to be ejected by the police for having overstayed their welcome. It seems that they were squatting in the town square. Making matters worse, they were cooking, washing and even hanging clothes from the town's civil war monument. Officials informed the Morgan family that they were a public nuisance and asked them to leave. The father, preacher-Morgan and his wife explained their poverty and ask town officials if they would be allowed to hold one more meeting in order to buy enough gas to get out of town. It was on that occasion that Anne the daughter, “unwashed but pretty,” sang this song called *I wonder as I wander*. Mind you this is July, so it was probably not sung originally as a Christmas carol but as a sacred folk song.

Now attending this meeting was none other than the famous John Jacob Niles one of America's great collectors of folk songs. Niles had been traveled throughout Appalachia in search of new song materials and he happened to be there in the right place at the right time. Niles was fascinated by Anne and this folk song called *I Wonder as I Wander*. So, he asked her to sing

to him with the agreement that each time she sang it, he would pay her twenty-five cents. Well, after eight renditions and using his own musical shorthand, he had transcribed the song. Unfortunately, only three lines of verse and a fragment of the original melody have survived in his manuscript collection.

For a moment I would now like to talk about this famous song collector:

John Jacob Niles was born in Kentucky in 1892 and lived to 1980. He was an American composer, singer, and collector of traditional folk songs. Called the "Dean of American Balladeers", Niles was an important influence on the American folk music revival of the 1950s and 1960s, especially with singers like Joan Baez, Pete Segar, Burl Ives, and Peter, Paul and Mary, among others, who recorded his songs.

Niles grew up in a musical family and learned music theory from his mother. He began writing down folk music as a hobby when he was a teenager. He later became a serious student of Appalachian folk music by transcribing traditional songs from their original oral sources.

Niles was especially interested in documenting the voices of his fellow soldiers of World War I. He was also interested in the spirituals of African Americans as well as the people of Appalachia. In the 1920s during trips to Appalachia, he collected, transcribed and arranged many traditional songs and ballads such as "Pretty Polly" and "Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair."



While serving in the US Army Air Corps in World War I, he was seriously injured. Niles remained in France after the war and studied music in Paris. After Paris he returned home for further studies at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music. In the 1930s, he toured Europe and the United States with the famous contralto, Marion Kerby. He also performed at the White House in 1938, and sang at the Newport Folk Festival in the 1950s. In 1936, he married Rena Lipetz and they settled on Boot Hill farm in Clark County, Kentucky, where they spent the rest of their lives. Niles died in Lexington, Kentucky, March 1, 1980 at the age of 87.

It is said that Niles sang in a strange high-pitched dramatic voice, a very high falsetto. He often accompanied himself on an Appalachian dulcimer, lute, or some other plucked stringed instruments often crafted by himself.



Here is a digitally enhanced recording with Niles himself singing this iconic folk Christmas song:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qRMSmaA-1-I>

Back to the history of *I Wonder as I Wander*:

In describing his encounter with Anne Morgan, here is how Niles himself explained it in his unpublished autobiography:

A girl had stepped out to the edge of the little platform attached to the automobile. She began to sing. Her clothes were unbelievable dirty and ragged, and she, too, was unwashed. Her ash-blond hair hung down in long skeins. ... But, best of all, she was beautiful, and in her untutored way, she could sing. She smiled as she sang, smiled rather sadly, and sang only a single line of the song.

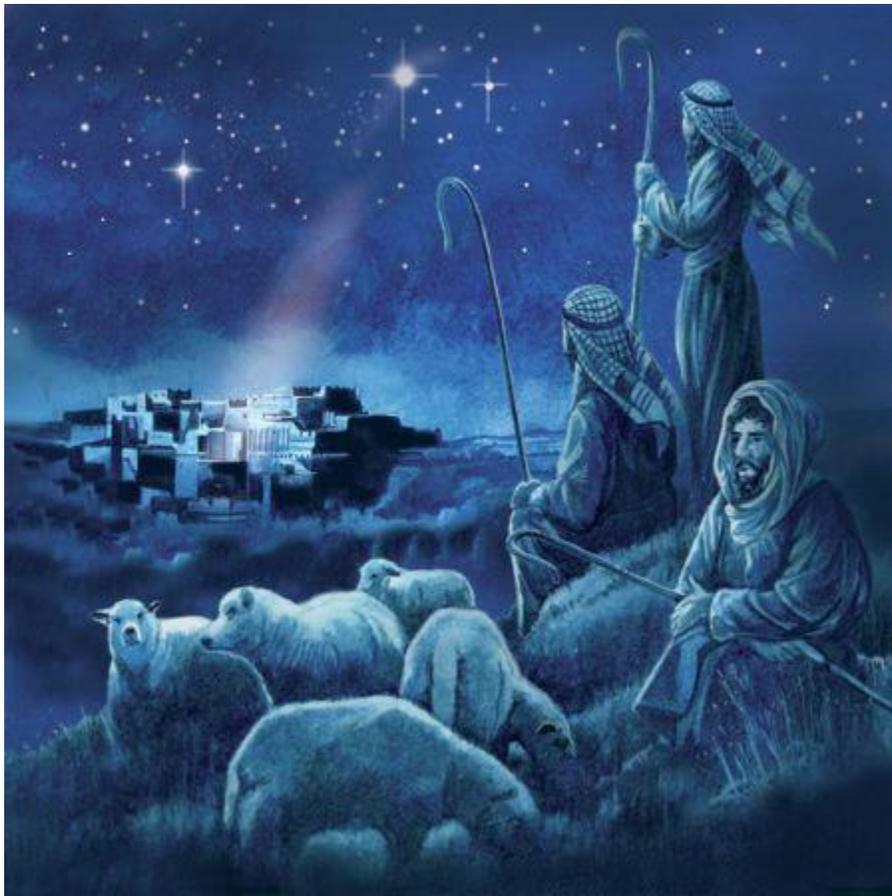
Niles soon got the idea of making this piece that he heard into a Christmas carol and he added new verses to the melody resulting in a wonderful example of a real American folk Carol, simple, genuine and humble.

In 1934 he published it in a book called *Songs of the Hill Folk*.

Where did this song originally come from? Certainly, Anne Morgan didn't make it up. Most people maintain that this song was passed along to her from some anonymous folk singer in the nineteenth century. That said, *I Wonder as I Wander* is still in the end, a product of Niles and his unique ability to quickly notate and create a beautiful song. But, his "folk composition" process caused confusion among instrumentalists and singers, many of whom believed the piece to be an authentic folk song

of anonymous origin. Niles actually went to court to establish his authorship, and charged other performers royalties to perform it.

Let's look at the text. These lyrics embrace the joy and wonder of Christmas but also speak to the sacrifice of Jesus who grows into a man and dies on a cross. Both the words and music are simple, direct, and inspired. Even a master songwriter like Niles couldn't imagine improving on them. *"Where did these words come from"* he thought as he returned home.



Here is the first verse as Niles heard it from Anne:

*I wonder as I wander out under the sky,
How Jesus the Savior did come for to die.
For poor on'ry[1] people like you and like I...
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.*

Nile's additional verses:

*When Mary birthed Jesus 'twas in a cow's stall,
With wise men and farmers and shepherds and all.
But high from God's heaven a star's light did fall,
And the promise of ages it then did recall.*

*If Jesus had wanted for any wee thing,
A star in the sky, or a bird on the wing,
Or all of God's angels in heav'n for to sing,
He surely could have it, 'cause he was the King.*

Back to the first verse:

*I wonder as I wander out under the sky,
How Jesus the Savior did come for to die.
For poor on'ry people like you and like I...
I wonder as I wander out under the sky.*

In conclusion, Niles's preservation and presentation of American folk songs earned him the title of "Dean of American Balladeers." His use of the dulcimer in his performances is credited with contributing to the popularity of that instrument today among traditional folk music scholars and performers. Niles's dedication to the folk music tradition lives on in generations of folk revival artists such as Jean Ritchie, Pete

Seeger, Joan Baez and many, many more. The song *I Wonder as I Wander* exemplifies the influence of John Jacob Niles and the American folk music resurgence of the 1950s and 1960s, and tells the story of a man at the forefront of that movement.

I Wonder as I Wander



LISTENING -

A famous performance by the great gospel singer **Mahalia Jackson**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rH6YAFdb1EU>

One of the most famous duos was the **composer Benjamin Britten and tenor, Peter Pears**. Here they are together performing this haunting Britten arrangement with Britten at the piano.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yn1JYRXuFKw>

Here is **John Rudder's** beautiful SATB arrangement performed by a group called **Vocore**:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=whERHDBeygg>

Exultate Chamber Choir & Orchestra. Thomas Rossin conducts his own arrangement of this John Jacob Niles' Christmas favorite.

Russ Carlson, Tenor, Debra Grahn, Soprano and Karyl Rice, Oboe

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-NrboRozXx4>

Thank you MSC Singers for coming together for another Tuesday class. Next week we will explore the beautiful folk carol, ***Go Tell it on a Mountain.***

And until then, be safe, and hearts high,   Stuart