

John Jacob Niles, the Kentucky folklorist and folk singer, died March 1, 1980, at the age of 87 at his Boot Hill Farm near Lexington. He was a collector of ballads and carols, which he performed throughout the United States and Europe in a career that spanned most of the twentieth century.

Born in Louisville in 1892, he grew up in a home where both parents were musicians. His mother gave him his initial musical training and taught him music theory. While working as a surveyor after high school, he grew interested in Southern Appalachian songs and began collecting them. His work in collecting and preserving America's folk music heritage and his performing of that music made him famous. In an appraisal of his work that appeared in *Current Biography*, it was stated "that with John and Alan Lomax, Mr. Niles has been largely responsible for the quickening of interest in American folk music."

Niles and Merton met, became friendly, and corresponded in the mid-60s. Their mutual friend, Victor Hammer of Lexington, painted well-known portraits of both men, that of Merton appeared on the dust jacket of *Thomas Merton/monk: a monastic tribute*. Another mutual friend, John Howard Griffin, took widely circulated photographs of them both, including that of Niles on the cover of this SEASONAL.

Niles developed an interest in setting some of Merton's poems to music and Merton gave him permission to use any poems he felt would be appropriate. From this interest came the NILES-MERTON SONG CYCLE. Merton heard a special performance of the first group of songs on October 2, 1967, the songs performed by Niles and Jacqueline Roberts. The first public performance was given at Bellarmine College during Town and Gown Week in 1968.

After Merton's death, Niles continued to work on the CYCLE. It was finished in 1972 and consisted of 22 poems with music. According to Niles' obituary in the *New York Times* (March 3, 1980), the NILES-MERTON SONG CYCLE was his last completed work.

In 1979, Jacqueline and Helm Roberts initiated a project to record and preserve the NILES-MERTON SONG CYCLE. The Thomas Merton Studies Center, recipient of a grant from the Kentucky Arts Commission, sponsored the project which was not completed until after Niles' death. Recorded in Lexington by Equus Sound, with Jacqueline Roberts, soprano, and Nancy Field, pianist, the completed NILES-MERTON SONG CYCLE is now on file in the Studies Center and may be heard by visitors.

The NILES-MERTON SONG CYCLE is comprised of the following poems by Merton. The order is that assigned by Ms. Roberts in the 1980 recording.

#### NILES-MERTON SONG CYCLE

1. "The Greek Women."
2. "Great Prayer," by Alfonso Cortes; translated from the Spanish by Thomas Merton.
3. "Lament of a Maiden for the Warrior's Death," by Pablo Antonio Cuadra; translated from the Spanish by Thomas Merton.

4. "Love Winter when the Plant says Nothing."
5. "The Weathercock on the Cathedral of Quito," by Jorge Carrera Andrade; translated from the Spanish by Thomas Merton.
6. "For my Brother: reported missing in Action, 1943."
7. "Wisdom."
8. "Autumn," by Raissa Maritain; translated from the French by Thomas Merton.
9. "Cana."
10. "Sundown."
11. "Evening."
12. "The Ohio River - Louisville."
13. "The Messenger."
14. "A Responsory, 1948."
15. "When you point your Finger," by Alfonso Cortes; translated from the Spanish by Thomas Merton.
16. "O Sweet Irrational Worship."
17. "The Nativity." (Originally titled by Merton "Carol.")
18. "Birdcage Walk."
19. "Mosaic: St. Praxed's," by Raissa Maritain; translated from the French by Thomas Merton.
20. "Cables to the Ace - # 80: Slowly slowly comes Christ through the Garden."
21. "Cables to the Ace - # 7: Original Sin (A Memorial Anthem for Father's Day)."
22. "The Mirror's Mission," by Jorge Carrera Andrade; translated from the Spanish by Thomas Merton.

John Jacob Niles  
 Jacqueline Roberts  
 Thomas Merton  
 and Janelle Pope,  
 October 28, 1967.  
 Photograph by  
 Helm Roberts.

