

Two Artichokes and a Full-Length Black-Bear Coat: Life in Lexington, Kentucky; or, Another Exercise in Name-Dropping

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[Introduction:] After my first paper titled "An Exercise in Name-Dropping," whose subtext was the opportunities and importunities of a young gay man in New York during the early 1960s, only one member of the club referred to that fact to me: the late Robert **Hilton**, the ultimate clubman, to my utter and gratified amazement, made a point of sitting with me at the annual picnic at Morse **Johnson's** place that June, specifically to tell me that he had enjoyed my paper on (quote) "sin and sophistication in New York"! Well, the following was intended to portray sin and sophistication in Lexington, Kentucky, during the late 1970s (when I was approaching middle age), but I am afraid it has got side-tracked by a very straight and altogether unforgettable character.

The Christmas before last, our member John **Campbell** touched many of us with his simple yet **achingly** sincere singing (to his own guitar accompaniment) of the beautiful Traditional carol, "I Wonder As I Wander," although, as John admits, his style and diction were formed more by John Denver than by John Jacob **Niles**, the actual author of the song. I recognized that our John's rendition immediately moved me far more than the occasion warranted, even though it was also a reminder of our recently deceased member. Bob **Kalthoff**, a dear friend of ours who founded and led the Literary Club's Christmas Chorale for several years. And indeed I had good reason to be especially moved by John Campbell's sweet mountain-tenor performance, since, through a surprising sequence of events and relationships, I was one of the pallbearers for John Jacob Niles, at St. Hubert's, just outside Lexington, an Episcopal Chapel dedicated to the patron saint of hunting, where annually the bishop blessed the hounds of the **Iroquois** Hunt.

Before I start to trace that sequence, however, I want to mention another episode that evoked, liked Proust's "**madeleine**," deeper emotions than might have been expected. For some reason, probably hereditary, my father, Walter **Consuelo** Langsam, who prized his dignity above all, was particularly sensitive to music; in fact, he rather avoided it, especially in public, for fear his carefully maintained reserve should crack. Nevertheless, when he was president of Wagner Memorial Lutheran College on **Staten** Island, New York, after World War II, a young war-widow named Dorothy often sang at college events. I do not remember her last name, just that she was homely and hook-nosed but blessed with innate dignity—and a gorgeous, if untrained contralto voice. And on special occasions she sang "I Wonder As I Wander" with such heartbreaking sincerity that my father, and indeed every member of the audience, was hard-put to restrain his

tears.

And now to my own story. In late 1978, at one of the low points of my life, I was stuck in Frankfort, Kentucky, recently divorced, isolated, jobless, and with no direction for the future. A few weeks before I had met in Lexington a man my own age with the old-family Central **Bluegrass** name of **Wendell** Gay Reading. He had been teased unmercifully during a stint in the Army in Vietnam, when he had tried to be called "Wendell" or "Dell" and only ended up being nicknamed "**Wendy**" (although he was far from effeminate), but he had reverted bravely to his middle name "**Gay**"—far less embarrassing in Lexington than in Vietnam! Gay and I had much in common, so I invited him to visit me in Frankfort. We had a very good time together until he asked for the bathroom, which was located beyond my bedroom. He emerged shortly, only to say a hasty goodbye. I was puzzled and, considering my difficulty in meeting congenial people in Frankfort, devastated.

A few weeks later, however, in the midst of the Great Blizzard of 1974, which had forced almost everyone indoors for the holidays and left me almost frantic with lack of human contact, I received from Gay an invitation to his annual Twelfth Night party, to which he seemed to invite almost everyone he knew. . . even someone who kept an elegantly framed photograph of himself in his bedroom. For that, it turned out, was what had offended Gay in Frankfort: he had assumed that my only early photograph of my father—a late 1920s studio portrait that his mother always kept on the piano in their New York apartment living-room—portrayed me and, as he said, he refused to know someone vain enough to display a glamorous portrait of himself in his bedroom!

So desperate was I for human company that, when I received Gay's Twelfth Night invitation, I hastily packed a small bag and threw on a full-length, black-bear coat that had surely first dazzled admirers at 1920s college football-games. It descended almost to my boots and its collar rose above my head when extended. Thus garbed, I literally lifted, one end at a time, my trusty yellow **Volkswagen** Beetle from a deep **snowdrift** into the street in a burst of unprecedented strength, and drove to Lexington. That was an eerie experience, as only one lane of the **unplowed** highway was open, but fortunately no-one else seemed to be on it that day.

Safely arrived in downtown Lexington, I found my way to Gay's house in an historic residential district on Second Street, just west of **Broadway** near **Gratz** Park and Transylvania College. He offered to put me up for the duration of the blizzard's aftermath, but I ended up staying four years! That was made possible from a practical standpoint by my soon getting a job with the **Lexington-Fayette** County Historic Commission, a fascinating experience in itself that will have to be saved for another paper. But, through Gay Reading, I was able to participate in one of the most

stimulating social and cultural scenes I have ever experienced: in fact, second in excitement only to my life in New York City in the early 1960s, as I chronicled it in the Literary Club paper 1 referred to at the beginning of this one.

It was that late 1970s Lexington life that gave me the occasion to meet John Jacob Niles, the great although now almost forgotten Appalachian-song collector, folk-singer, and composer I mentioned at the outset. I also got to know and admire his fascinating wife, promoter, and protector Rena Lipetz Niles, the daughter of White Russian immigrant psychoanalysis in Albany, New York, and herself a brilliant if, I suspect, unmusical woman. I had long enjoyed and almost worshiped John Jacob Niles' once-famous and now extremely rare Camden-label LP recordings of mountain ballads and of Ohio rivermen's and gamblers' chanties, and I had even heard him give a memorable recital in New York in the 1960s.

John Jacob Niles, born in 1892, was brought up in a southern suburb of Louisville, Kentucky. He claimed his father was the local sheriff—once a more honored and possibly lucrative position than it is now. My first glimpse of John Jacob as a young man was, coincidentally, given me by a friend in Louisville, George Yater, who grew up next door to the Niles' on the Olmsted-designed Iroquois Parkway. George recalled being both puzzled and intrigued as a small child when the somewhat older Johnny Niles brought a chair out to their family backyard one Spring day, settled his oddly-dressed mother in it, and began to take photographs of her in profile. Only years later did George realize that the big boy next door was recreating that ubiquitous painting, "Whistler's Mother"!

Photography, it turned out, played a significant but indirect role in John Jacob's life and career. As a handsome if rather simian young man—the Niles men tend to have a prognathous jaw, prominent cheekbones, small bright eyes, and large hands on exceptionally long arms—he acted as the companion, factotum, and possibly lover of Doris Ulmann, a wealthy and talented but somewhat physically disabled New York woman who had discovered photography. In the early 1930s she and John were driven by a German chauffeur around the Appalachian Mountains. While he collected folk-music, she took movingly honest and unadorned portraits of the local men and women. (She is not to be confused with the better-known Dorothea Lange, whose photographs of similar subjects sponsored by the Farm Security Administration are, of course, among America's most memorable Depression-era images.)

At this point in writing this paper I perhaps made the mistake of looking up John Jacob Niles on Google Search, rather than relying solely on my often fallible memory. So I am inserting here a short biography by Ronnie Lankfort, Jr., that I found on a Website:

"Music played an important part in the early life of John Jacob Niles, and he would spend his life collecting, composing, and performing folk songs. By the age of 15 he had begun collecting songs in the Appalachian Mountains, a habit he would continue while serving as a ferry pilot in the U.S. Air Corps during World War I. Niles remained in France after the war, studying music at the [Universite de Lyon](#) and the [Schola Cantorum](#) in Paris. He would continue his studies for two more years at the Cincinnati Conservatory of Music upon returning to the United States. [This is a surprise to me, as I have never heard him spoken of as a distinguished alumnus of the College-Conservatory.] In 1921, he came to New York where he met the ... [contralto] Marion [Kerby](#). [Kerby](#) shared his love of folk music, so the two decided to work as a team, traveling throughout Europe and the United States. [Apparently, at this time Niles was still performing as a baritone.] Niles [then] collected folk songs in the Southeast while working as a guide ... for photographer [Doris Ulmann](#).

"During the '20s and '30s, he began publishing collections of folk songs, including *Singing Soldiers* (1927), *Songs My Mother Never Taught Me* (1929), and *Songs of the Hill-folk* (1934). In the '30s he began to perform solo, traveling widely and singing at high schools, churches, and colleges. He dressed in bright-colored shirts, wore corduroys, and sang in a striking, high falsetto. [Barry Alfonso](#), recalling the first time he heard Niles on record, wrote, 'Out of my stereo came his startling, other-worldly voice, the sound of someone enraptured—or maybe possessed. He seemed to embody his dire ballad, rather than to merely perform it.'"

(At this point music was played on a portable stereo.)

"I Wonder As I Wander," thanks to my guest [Lloyd Engelbrecht](#) who, with his vast collection of old recordings and the technology to play them, made this CD for me.

To continue with [Lankfort's](#) account:

"[Niles](#) wrote a number of classic folk songs that are often mistaken for traditional material, including, "Black Is the Color of My True Love's Hair," "Go 'Way From My Window," and "I Wonder as I Wander." He recorded numerous albums, including *Early American Ballads* (1939) and *American Folk Lore* (1941). He also composed more formal music, writing the oratorio "Lamentation," which would receive its first performance at the Indiana State Teachers College in 1951. Between 1967 and 1970 he would compose a work based on the poetry of Thomas [Merton](#) titled 'The [Niles-Merton](#) Songs' [probably his finest and most moving non-folk-related work]. *The Songs of John Jacob Niles* was published in 1975 and Niles would continue to perform publicly until two years before his death in 1980. Part Renaissance man, part traveling minstrel, ["part camp-meeting [preacher](#), or Southern politician trying to make a pitch for a few votes"], Niles left

an invaluable body of recordings, folk-song collections, and compositions behind. His work has greatly aided the preservation and continued vitality of American folk culture." [End quote.]

I may add that, at least by the time I knew him during his last few years when he was in his mid-80s, John Jacob was a vain, self-centered, and demanding old geezer. He had, for instance, been furiously jealous of Gay's exquisite Siamese cat, "Lady Thiang," named for an admirable character in "The King and I," when she chose to preen and clean herself with studied elegance in the midst of a group of devotees gathered in Gay's studio-living-room to hear one of the Master's last private recitals. The Siamese lady barely avoided, with her cat's ninth life, being speared by the jack-knife that John Jacob often used with hair-raising affect at the climax of one of his tragic mountain ballads. Perched precariously on a tall stool, he would flip it into the floor, barely missing! his own feet. Fortunately, in this case. Lady Thiang scampered away with uncharacteristic haste and John Jacob proceeded with his program.

As Lankfort's capsule biography indicates, John Jacob Niles had obviously always been spoiled by his women-folk. This pattern continued only up to a point after his marriage in 1936 to Rena Lipetz, a remarkable woman, who played a role in her talented but maddening husband's life very similar to that of Olgivanna Lloyd Wright, the architect Frank Lloyd Wright's last wife and long-time widow, who kept a stranglehold over his papers, estate, and reputation for decades after his death in 1959. Niles was not the subject of a cult comparable to Wright's, and Rena was a far more sensitive, less autocratic woman, but it was without doubt she who maintained John Jacob, their stringent yet somehow luxurious life-style, and his royalties for much of their later lives. The Niles' suffered from continuing financial constraints and a distressful lack of appreciation as times changed and younger folk-singers took over his role and repertory. Such performers usually did so without acknowledgment, to the dismay of Rena, who frequently resorted to litigation on behalf of his copyrights to supposedly Traditional songs.

Here is John Jacob Niles' own account of the circumstances surrounding his creation of either the words or the music of the definitive versions of two of his most famous songs, including the one that started off these reminiscences of mine; it also suggests his style as a vivid if self-justifying *raconteur*:

"'Black Black Is The Color of My True Love's Hair' . . . was composed between 1916 and 1921. I had come home from eastern Kentucky, singing this song to an entirely different tune—a tune not unlike the public-domain material employed even today. My father liked the lyrics, but thought

the tune was downright terrible. So I wrote myself a new tune, ending it in a nice modal manner. My composition has since been 'discovered' by many an aspiring folk-singer.

"'I Wonder As I Wander' grew out of three lines of music sung for me by a girl who called herself Annie Morgan. The place was Murphy, North Carolina, and the time was July, 1933. The Morgan family, revivalists all, were about to be ejected by the police, after having camped in the town square for some little time, cooking, washing, hanging their wash from the Confederate monument and generally conducting themselves in such a way as to be classed a public nuisance. Preacher Morgan and his wife pled poverty; they had to hold one more meeting in order to buy enough gas to get out of town. It was then that Annie Morgan came out—a tousled, unwashed blond, and very lovely. She sang the first three lines of the verse of 'I Wonder As I Wander.' At twenty-five cents a performance, I tried to get her to sing all the song. After eight tries, all of which are carefully recorded in my notes, I had only three lines of verse, a garbled fragment of melodic material—and a magnificent idea. With the writing of additional verses and the development of the original melodic material, 'I Wonder As I Wander' came into being. I sang it for five years in my concerts before it caught on. Since then, it has been sung by soloists and choral groups wherever the English language is spoken and sung."²

And now, at last, I return to the full-length black-bear coat, a really magnificent souvenir of flapper and roadster days, which had been given to me by a friend who found it while cleaning out the closets in her family's thirty-eight-room High-Victorian mansion in a neighboring county seat. All this was, of course, long before the anti-fur campaign had made us—or at least our children—aware of the immorality of hunting, shooting, and displaying as macho trophies the skins of the most challenging animals. This particular black bear (I'm not sure that that is the correct technical term, but the hair was certainly a uniform, thick, and glossy black) must have been huge, as the coat was extremely heavy and probably almost six feet long when the collar was raised around the wearer's head. It rather overwhelmed the person inside, but was gratifyingly warm to wear, while the impression on others was both dashing and impressive. Somehow, it combined Jack London's "The Call of the Wild" with F. Scott Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby," with perhaps just a hint of P.G. Wodehouse's Bertie and Jeeves! In operatic terms it reminded me of Puccini's "The Girl of the Golden West," especially the scene that was featured in the early edition of the *Victrola Book of Opera* that simultaneously delighted and terrified me as a child: the photograph portrayed a life-or-death card-game between the virtuous and eponymous girl Minnie and the villain, played on a makeshift table in the rustic mountain cabin that had been fully reproduced on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera in the early 20th century. Thanks to her gambler father's training, Minnie is about to win the game and preserve her virtue, when a drop of blood falls onto the table from the

wounds of the hero, lying hidden in the loft above: a scene second in *verismo* luridness only to Tosca's famous leap from the parapet of Castel Sant' Angelo in that eponymous opera! In any case, buried within the black-bear coat one felt both "Devil-may-care" and "Nothing to be trifled with."

All these characteristics, or perhaps fantasies, surrounding the coat were manifested in Lexington at the end of my first week there. Gay lived just a couple of short blocks from the new downtown Arena and Conference Center, as well as the historic Lexington Opera House, a recently restored venue for touring Broadway shows and local orchestra concerts. But the massive snowfall kept almost everyone holed up at home—rather like hibernating bears! Finally we were able to emerge from snowbound incarceration in Gay's house and other neighboring residences in the Gratz Park historic district, the home of most of Gay's and his aunt's circle of bachelors, a few husbands and wives, and many old ladies. We had only to struggle a block or two through what seemed like mile-high snowdrifts to get to several events that had long been scheduled and were still being presented, despite the relatively few hardy souls in the audiences. Naturally, I wore my already famous full-length black-bear coat, which had virtually guaranteed my *entree* into Gay's otherwise apparently elite and exclusive circle of *culturati*. (I soon learned, however, that this circle was marked as much by its openness to anyone interesting as by its exclusion of the dull.) The coat turned out to be entirely appropriate to both these occasions.

On our first excursion into the snowy outside world, we attended a traveling "rodeo" [row-day-oh, as we called it, not having the benefit of John Wilson's Texas upbringing!]. Trailing into excellent seats in the first row of an upper balcony—far enough from the arena to feel safe from charging bulls, yet close enough to provide a series of *frissons* at the riders' derring-do—I casually cast my coat across the parapet of the balcony. It could hardly have had greater affect. The animals below instantly sensed an ancient prey and upped their ante of bravado and terror: it was said to have been one of the most exciting shows in the history of touring rodeos. And naturally the proprietors of the coat were the cynosure of all the farmers, motorcyclists, and would-be urban cowboys in the audience.

That was sufficiently gratifying, but the next evening's event was even more attention-getting, but in a very different way, as it turned out. Vincent Price, the popular horror-movie actor, had traded on his creepily hypnotic stare and an air of decadence—he was known to be a considerable art-collector—to great success in the 1960s and '70s. By 1978, however, he was touring the provinces as Oscar Wilde, presenting a one-man show of readings with great flair. His faintly effete manner allowed him to suggest Oscar's preference for "The Love That Dare Not Speak Its Name," while demonstrating the wit and verve—the Oxford-trained timing and the Irish way with words-mat

had made Oscar himself such a theatrical triumph on his notorious 1882 tour across the United States, when he temporarily won over even conservative Cincinnati!

It turned out that Gay's aunt Carolyn Reading Hammer, his mentor and neighbor in nearby **Gratz** Park, had found a connection with Vincent Price through an art-collecting friend. This was not unusual, as I discovered before long: she and her late husband, the multi-talented artist and fine book-maker Victor Hammer, had had an ability to attract names worth dropping that exceeded even my own! And their trophies were often authentic geniuses, such as Boris Pasternak and Thomas **Merton**, who were truly worthy of respect. . . and perhaps of yet another paper. Vincent Price may have been of lesser note, but his portrayal of Wilde was elegant and moving, witty and even tragic. Caroline Hammer's connections had provided us with front-row seats, so close that we suspected Price occasionally winked at us, and I got the distinct impression that he was "cruising" me, so frequent and intense were his glances in my direction. After the show we naturally went backstage to meet the star, who turned out to be as fascinating and insightful off the stage as on it. But, to my combined regret and relief, it was not me he was cruising, but that **goll-danged** full-length black-bear coat! He coveted it almost desperately for his entrance as Oscar—and indeed it would have been perfect for the part. But I hesitated to give away a gift from a friend, for however worthy a cause. That was fortunate, as it turned out, since her husband had by no means forgotten this treasure of his youth, and she frantically reclaimed it shortly after its star turn in post-blizzard Lexington.

Rena Niles was at the core of the Hammers' group. By the time I arrived, however, John Jacob was already quite physically frail, while his ego had if anything become more all-consuming and demanding. He managed to give at least one more folk-song recital at the University of Kentucky; we were terrified that his aforesaid jack-knife might finally impale him to the floor, but in performance he was, to the last, a total professional. Like Rachmaninoff, he would determine through infinite effort what he believed to be the ideal performance of a given song, and then always perform it exactly the same way. Yet, instead of producing an impression of mechanical artistry at work, John Jacob's performances—no doubt like Rachmaninoff's—always conveyed a sense of spontaneous discovery, of trapeze-like **precariousness**, even hair-raising risk. You felt that you were hearing some Appalachian folk-singer's masterpiece for the first time, creating the essential matrix of integrated song and word from an overlay of poverty and deprivation, suffering hopeless tragedy under helpless circumstances, yet retaining a stoic and possibly heroic decorum. Hamlet, Ophelia, and the Court of Denmark; Orpheus and **Eurydice**; Puccini's heroines Minnie, **Madame** Butterfly, **Tosca**, and **Turandot**, and their usually weaker men-folk—all were embodied in the men and women whose fate had left them in the Depression-era mountains of Kentucky or

Tennessee, while Shakespeare and the Bible had sustained the Elizabethan origins of their language.

This was hardly an anthropological approach, and some have felt that John Jacob Niles and other early folk-song collectors exploited their sources' traditional culture: what they had maintained of their dignity and faith amidst hardship and isolation. But, like Doris [Ulmann](#), he seems to have had great sympathy with his subjects, while [unblushingly](#) creating works of art from their words and music that were self-contained, perfect, yet [tantalizingly](#) open-ended (remember that modal cadence at the end of "Black Black"). And he could still draw on that combination of professionalism and magic in his mid-80s.

Shortly after their marriage in the depths of the Depression, John Jacob [Niles](#), this exiled home-boy with his Continental military experience and exalted musical training, and [Rena Lipetz](#) Niles, daughter of White Russian emigres with a background in journalism, found refuge in "Boot Hill Farm." It was a hard-scrabble plot of land some distance from Lexington in dark County near the [Iroquois](#) Hunt Club and, later, St. Hubert's Episcopal Church. Their land was just above a winding creek, on a tortuous farm-road. Their home began with a prefabricated unit that grew organically and gradually, with rooms and wings of a variety of materials added in all directions, to form eventually a roughly three-sided courtyard, preserving favorite rocks, trees, and shrubs. There were frequent changes of level so that field-stone steps, hearths, and built-in benches often served as transitions from one to another. Floors tended to be of irregularly laid stone, but here and there were exquisite Oriental carpets. Many of the furnishings were self-consciously rustic, comfortable and occasionally collapsible, yet every now and then one came across superb Russian Empire cabinets and consoles, samovars and icons—relics of [Rena's](#) family's past.

A number of doors at "Boot Hill" and elsewhere had been carved by John Jacob, energetically and confidently, with tributes to local flora and fauna, as well as runic signs and esoteric symbols, the creatures of his fertile and rather ribald imagination. A group of these, wrenched out their contexts, is now on display at the John Jacob Niles Center for American Music at the University of Kentucky Library, along with his manuscripts, notebooks, priceless historic dulcimers, and other artifacts. He had also applied his carving to the dining-room table at "Boot Hill Farm," where he presided with a firm hand, starting each meal with a long prayer for grace that ended inevitably yet always [startlingly](#), "and give us the courage, the fortitude, and the *GUTS to do Thy work*!"

Ironically, yet consistently with their innate contradictions, the [Niles'](#) had kept a wonderful Black cook and housekeeper through thick and thin. A local lady from an Antebellum African-American

crossroads community, she was dignified yet caring, and an unsurpassed cook. She delighted in producing delicious meals that ranged from traditional **Bluegrass** dishes based on local produce, from the blackberries on the farm that I painfully picked all one summer; through the famous home-made butter of Mrs. **J. Fauntleroy Pursley**, the ultimate *grande dame* and Mistress of the Hunt; to the refined and sophisticated Continental cuisine that she created at **Rena's** behest.

And that mouth-watering butter brings me to another example of the surprising juxtapositions in the life-styles of the Hammers, the Niles,' and their multiple peripheral circles. Every fall the aristocratic members of the **Iroquois** Hunt Club held a steeplechase to thank the local farmers and their wives for allowing them to hunt across their land, and for sharing the bounty of their farms. All the food and arrangements were provided on these occasions by the members of the club, and a rather helter-skelter steeplechase was run over a course on the sloping side of a ridge, in a wide field dotted with ancient trees and many other natural and **manmade** hazards. It was viewed from the top of the ridge by members of the club and a select few others. A salmagundi of vehicles was lined up beside a straggling fence along the ridge, ranging from farm-wagons to **Range Rovers**, all cheek-by-jowl with open tailgates. Spread out on the ground nearby were historic quilts and gaudy plaid horse-blankets, plastic **tablecloths** and precious linens worthy of **Glyndeboume** picnics. Down-home and dowager were still the keynotes of that life.

While I was living in Lexington during the late 1970s and early '80s, my daughter **Thea**, born in 1971, was growing up in Louisville with her mother. Thea and I got together in one city or the other most weekends, and she and Gay, who had a somewhat childlike charm under his cultivation, got along very well. The relative longevity of his and my relationship no doubt helped, too. Not long ago, during our recent move from a fair-sized house on **Fairview** Avenue to a four-room condominium in the delightful Rue **de la Paix**, I discovered at the farthest corner of the former basement—the last place to be sorted—the dolls'-house Gay Reading made for **Thea**. It is not quite my own childhood icon—silent-film star Colleen **Davis** magical Doll's Castle (now in the Museum of Science and Technology in Chicago)—but a plywood box made to fit exactly into a mover's "china barrel," with three floors and a roof-deck. The outside walls are neatly fitted with blueprints derived from one of **Palladio's** villas, and the interior boasts colorful wallpapers made from Gordon **Fraser's** fine wrapping-papers, each chosen according to the function of the room. The furnishings have mostly disappeared, but the house itself is waiting for the next generation.

Among our Lexington friends, **Rena Niles** seemed particularly to enjoy **Thea's** company, and the pleasure was mutual. She tended to treat Thea very much like a grown-up, but with a charming archness that implied the two of them knew better than we adults did. Here is an example,

although it somewhat backfired! One year, **Rena** patronized a folk-music and crafts fair that met in a farm-field between Lexington and "Boot Hill Farm" that turned out to be baking in the summer heat. As a special favor to her, the magnificent African-American folk-singer known only as **Odetta** had agreed to perform—quite a generous gesture considering the makeshift nature of the stage, facilities, and audience, who were spread out on colorful quilts across the uncomfortable **stubblefield**. Odetta had been a cult-figure among my roommates at one of my colleges—I still have several glorious **LPs** others that I will not play for you today! She combined the grandest physical and vocal stature with an ability to sustain and project the sweetest, barely audible tones, all with remarkably clear diction. In some ways she was the complement of John Jacob **Niles**—the range of music she chose and made her own was multicultural before we knew the term, in contrast to his usually narrow focus on the Appalachian mountains and Ohio River Valley—but she was a comparable artist in her total concentration and appearance of spontaneity while performing perfected numbers. What we hadn't realized was that by the 1970s she, like her very opposite number **Eartha Kitt**, had become somewhat belligerently anti-capitalist and even anti-White: she sang as an encore an African "click" song, making a sound I'd never heard before and never want to hear again, as she almost literally spat a tirade at the all-white audience.

Nevertheless, she was usually gracious to individuals, so when **Rena** took **Thea** and me to **Odetta's un-air-conditioned** trailer dressing-room, she received with rather regal patience my effusions over how much she had meant to me and my roommates. Then Rena introduced Thea, saying "**Odetta**, this is Miss Thea Langsam." To which she replied with surprising vehemence, "Well, then, it's Miss Odetta to you!" The idol did not fall from her pedestal, but it shook a bit, even though her irritation under the overall circumstances was certainly understandable.

By this time, John Jacob was very much in his final decline. He had dwindled to a veritable monkey in physical size, fetal posture, ever longer-seeming arms, and only occasionally still-bright eyes. He could never get warm, despite blazing fires in the large stone fireplaces at "Boot Hill Farm." Increasingly wrapped in layers of quilted and crocheted blankets, he huddled in outsize chairs apparently glaring at the indignities of old age, which had finally caught up with him. He was said to have "aphasia," a mysterious condition that leads to a stereotypical division of the sexes: supposedly, female victims of aphasia never stop talking, while men never speak at all!

One chilly early Spring afternoon Thea and I paid a visit to the **Niles'** at "Boot Hill." Rena welcomed us and led us to the "big room" where, beside the roaring flames on the wide stone hearth, John Jacob was curled up shivering and silent, barely acknowledging our presence. The three of us began chatting, engrossed in our enjoyment of each other, and eventually forgetting the Master's presence. At that exact moment, there emerged from amidst the bundle on the hearth a

claw, two glaring eyes, and the piercing exclamation "Shee-ITT"! Lady **Thiang** could not have been more startled than we. Thank God John Jacob no longer wielded his jack-knife!

That was the last time we, or for that matter anyone but his family and a male nurse, heard Johnny **Niles** perform and saw him alive. A few days later we were informed that he had died, and Gay and I were asked to be pallbearers at the funeral service in St. Hubert's where he was to be buried in the small adjoining cemetery. I suspect I would not have been included in this honor, as there were others in the area who had known the Niles' far longer, but **Rena** had insisted, as Johnny intended, on having an extra-large, totally plain, and alarmingly heavy, solid oak casket. It took all her persuasiveness and peremptory Russian authority, not to mention a small fortune, to get such a simple coffin made overnight, in the face of the undertaker's salesmanship. After a most touching service, on a dismal rainy day, with renditions of his favorite hymns and compositions, including, of course, "I Wonder As I Wander," we ten pallbearers struggled to lift the massive coffin off its **sawhorses**, carried it through the carved wooden door that Johnny considered his masterpiece, and staggered up a slippery, muddy path that almost led to disaster as we all but dropped the casket, finally making it to the country graveyard where John Jacob Niles was laid to rest.

Well, not surprisingly, Johnny Niles has taken over this paper, and not left much room for "sin and sophistication," not to mention the two eponymous artichokes. I'll have to save them for another Monday. Thank you.

Endnotes

' <http://www.mp3.com/iohn-iacob-niles/artists/1754/biography.html>. quoted from the "All Music Guide." Corrections and additions have been made here based on a "Remembrance" by John Jacob Niles and the Preface by Jonathan Williams in The Appalachian Photographs of Doris Ulmann (Penland, N.C: The Jargon Society, 1971).

² Quoted at least second-hand from [www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns and Carols/Biographies/iohn_iacob_niles.html](http://www.hymnsandcarolsofchristmas.com/Hymns_and_Carols/Biographies/iohn_iacob_niles.html), with a few small corrections and omissions.