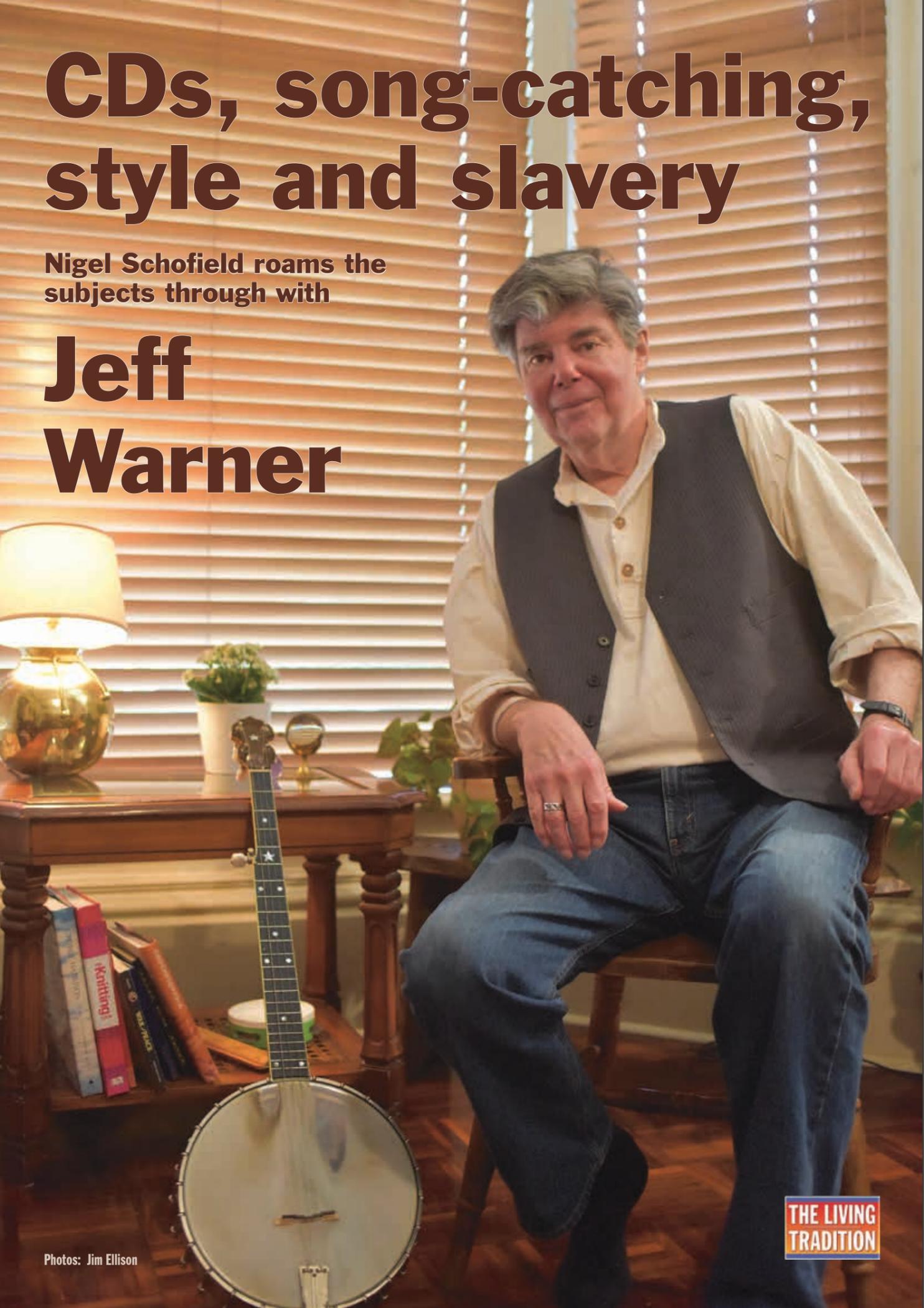


CDs, song-catching, style and slavery

Nigel Schofield roams the subjects through with

Jeff Warner



Photos: Jim Ellison

THE LIVING TRADITION

Jeff Warner has been coming to tour in the UK on a regular basis for over 20 years. Alongside his skills as a performer and his vast and varied repertoire of songs, he has the distinction of a significant parental heritage. His mother and father, Frank and Ann Warner, made several visits to what were at the time (and in some cases still are) remote regions of the Eastern seaboard states, collecting songs and performances from traditional singers there. They created a unique and invaluable archive.

Unlike British collectors, they didn't go with the aim of stealing traditional tunes to reshape into a classical format or to capture the old songs before advances in technology and entertainment made them extinct. The range of music performed by the singers and musicians encountered was significant to them in its own right. A singer such as Frank Proffitt might offer a traditional ballad with Scottish roots alongside a version of a song recently released by Jimmy Rogers. Pop meets folk, to borrow the title of a short-lived TV series. This eclecticism informs Jeff's approach to folk music.

The night before our lunchtime interview, I'd watched as he performed a set which embraced shanties and sentimental songs, ballads and hymns and, of course, songs collected by his parents. Part way through our conversation, we discussed the motivations that lay behind preserving and performing traditional music.

"It's a wide subject with probably as many subtly different answers as there are people singing folksongs," he says. "Rather than consider them and certainly without wishing to dismiss or diminish any of them, I can give my reasons. In fact, let me sum it up before we go into any kind of detail with a quote from an article I read in the New York Times, shortly after 911. It was in a piece in which the author explained why going to museums was important. Like a good folksinger, I borrowed it and adapted it slightly to my own purpose... 'I bring the latest news from the distant past.'"

Speaking of the latest news, a few days before we met, Jeff had just released his latest CD, *Roam The Country Through*, an album of American music on a British label. Because of his collaborations and projects like *Short Sharp Shanties*, it's hard to know how to count his releases over the years. How did this one come about?

Jeff explains: "Fair point – let's say it's my third solo CD release. That gets that out of the way with no area of dispute remaining. The story of how it came about is longer than it is interesting. Doug Bailey who runs WildGoose Records in Hampshire wanted me to make a third album. I honestly didn't think a third album of Jeff Warner singing traditional songs was something the world wanted, let alone needed. However, the combination of flattery and interest spurred me on to at least consider it."

"Doug won. The album got made. In retrospect, I'm glad. It's a fun album. My brother had been at me to record an album which is more like what I do on stage. That is, more pared down, essentially solo stuff. The thing is, a recording is not a stage performance and the two things do require a different approach. A lot of what I do on stage isn't the songs themselves: it's the context, the conversation, the style, making friends with the audience, their participation – which I must say is always a big and enjoyable part of singing in the UK. Just doing the song doesn't do it."

"On an album, the focus is entirely on the song and the technicalities of performance. No matter how strong the songs themselves were, I wanted the texture of more than just my own solo performance. I had to find people to help me musically that also would keep it simple. I believe I was successful in doing that."

"I heard Ben Paley at a couple of festivals and it struck me he might be the ideal person to play fiddle: in my opinion, he's the best American fiddler in England. In contrast, over several years I'd been won over by Alice Jones, a very English performer; she's the person I picked not only to play on the album but also to sing with me. Her Yorkshire accent set against my New England pronunciation made for an interesting combination. She's so energetic and enthusiastic and eager to do the necessary research that it worked out really well – even better than I expected in fact."

Like Jeff, Ben is someone with a personal folk heritage. "Second generation serious folkie, indeed. Who better to learn from than his father Tom?"

Tom Paley was an original member of The New Lost City Ramblers, the group that in

the late fifties brought first the music and later the performers that people like Jeff's father had collected to a wider folk audience. He died last year. That would be around the time Jeff was making the CD.

"It was. Ben told me a story of Tom being ill in his bed. Ben was due to go to China to play and was going to pull out because of his father's ill health. When he heard this, Tom pricked up in his bed and said, 'Don't stay because of this,' and then lay back down again. So, Ben went, and his father died shortly after he returned. We were due to record the album in October. It was Ben's decision and also his father's wish that his passing shouldn't get in the way of anything Ben had plans to do. Ben was great, so quick and so fast, a joy to work with, even in those trying circumstances. One thing I loved was, for example, he'd been adding fiddle to something I'd already put down; I'd hear what he'd done and say, 'That's a bit bluesy, a bit 1925, could you roll it back to, say, 1885?' And he would, perfectly, next take."

Both the CD and what Jeff does on stage deliberately cover a wide range of music – from the pop songs of their day, to hymns, to the dustier corners of the American tradition, as well as unusual versions of more familiar material.

"Familiarity is a strange one. Sometimes I'll do something which is really widely known in the States, like *Tenting Tonight*, and discover it's almost unknown over here. Then I'll do something which I think is obscure and find out lots of people have heard of it because it was a hit during the skiffle era or featured on that BBC schools programme that featured singing together to traditional songs. I've stopped trying to prejudge."

"Doug likes a lot of material on a release – 17 tracks on this album. That meant I had to look round in my repertoire to see what I had left that was suitable to record and maybe look at one or two things I'd done a good while ago and revisit them, particularly things that might not be available any longer. I think in the end there were only three things we were seriously considering that didn't make it onto the album."

"So far as the variety of music goes, folk music is and always has been a broad spectrum anyway. One thing that has

always fascinated me is the huge influence of Tin Pan Alley up to the 1920s on both traditional and old timey music. I wanted to include things like *Dixie Darling* and *The Girls They Go Wild Over Me*, partly because they are such fun, both to sing and to hear. Some of those songs, in the same way 19th century ballads did, have kind of broken away from their authorship and are in the process of becoming traditional, even though they were once determinedly commercial."

"That worked both ways, of course, because traditional musicians from folk, blues, gospel and so on were recorded for commercial release. That's true of most of the things that ended up on the Harry Smith Anthology. These recordings became the foundation of not only country music but also commercial blues and its many offshoots. Popular music from Shakespeare's time right through to vaudeville in the States and music hall over here has always drawn on traditional music. The various forms that emerged at the start of the last century became the foundation of the pop music that emerged at the end of that century and is still with us today. You can't dismiss something because of where something came from any more than you can dismiss something because of where it ultimately went."

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“In truth, with that early period of recording, it’s really hard to determine who’s a rural traditional singer and who’s a commercial artist, not least because they influenced each other so much in terms of both style and repertoire.”

“Recording made a huge difference and you can see it in how collectors thought of what they were doing. Were they collecting songs, in which case you could get the tune from one verse and then all you needed was the rest of the lyrics? Were they collecting performances? Were they recording performers? In different instances, the answer is yes to any of those. My parents, of course, did all three things.”

“I love what I see a lot of in the UK that I don’t see at all in America – the use by young musicians of traditional tunes and texts to create new music. There’s a school of thought, and you find it a lot in the States, that disregards the fact that any version, be it written down or mechanically recorded, is of the moment and not definitive or intended to be faithfully replicated. Folk is an ongoing, vital thing. There’s actually no such thing as doing it wrong, just doing it differently. There is, of course, also a place for going back and performing a song in the style that we know it was once performed in, and that’s one of the things I try to do with some songs.”

“Folk and traditional music is much more popular, in several senses of the word, here than it is in the States. It’s complicated, of course, because we have bluegrass and Cajun and blues and lots of other stuff that’s got its place in folk while also being commercially successful, but there’s little interest in Appalachian music or our seafaring traditions of the Eastern seaboard. They happen to be two areas that particularly interest me.”

“Here, young kids are using traditional material, rearranging, updating it, rewriting it even – and don’t forget that’s what people have always done; that’s what happened to English ballads in America – and I think that is a great thing. It’s something that fills me with hope and I wish it was happening in my country too. It’s exactly what was happening in the 1920s where commercial popular music and traditional popular music were able to cross pollinate.”



We turn from discussing Jeff’s latest CD to what, to me, are the two most important releases he has been involved in - though not as a performer, as a project curator. I’m talking about the two CDs of his parents’ field recordings.

“Tim Erikson befriended Jeff Davis and me as a teenager, after he came to see us at a concert in Stoneybrook, Long Island.

Through that he got to know my mother, which led to him hearing the recordings she and my father had made on their field trips to the Appalachians. He became a successful artist in his own right, of course, recording for Appleseed Records, and it was he who convinced them to release the two albums of recordings made by my father which include people who were great performers like Frank Proffitt, the Tillet Family and John

Galusha, as well as the source versions, if you like, of so many well-known American folk songs.”

“In 1999, myself and my brother Gerret, who’s a film-maker, got together and spent the year going through all the recordings my parents made. He lives in Portsmouth, New Hampshire; I moved there for the project and have lived there ever since. It proved important to us in different

ways. It brought him back into the music; it refreshed my memory of what my folks have done. As a result, many of those songs became part of my repertoire.”

“We deliberately picked out the things we thought were the best sounding. There’s a lot that’s more significant than some of the things on the CDs but, again, as with recording and performing on stage, a CD has different requirements to a reference archive. Many of the recordings were just fragments, perhaps a verse to capture a tune; partly that was the result of the cost of making recordings and the physical issues that arose from having to take equipment to remote places. My folks were aware of the need to save money on the cost of discs.”

“When he was first collecting, my father didn’t make mechanical recordings. He transcribed words and remembered and then wrote out the tunes. He later went back and recorded many of the people he’d met on earlier trips, including some truly great singers and musicians. Out of that came two CDs – *Her Bright Smile Haunts Me Still*, which is an anthology of various singers, and *Nothings Seems Better To Me*, which focuses on recordings by Frank Proffitt and his North Carolina neighbours.”

On Jeff’s new CD, there’s a photo that reminds us that he was involved in the making of those historic recordings. “Involved is something of an overstatement,” he says, “though certainly I was there for some of them. The CD has a photo of me with John Galusha. He was a logger from the Adirondacks, born in 1850. And there’s me as a three-year-old. In my opinion, he’s one of the most influential singers. He had a distinctive way of ending the line by speaking it. That’s something from the Irish tradition and John was fifth generation Irish. Vic Smith once played me a recording of a Northern Irish singer using the same technique. I find its survival in the States fascinating.”

We move on again to talk about another current project – Jeff’s live shows with Matthew Crampton.

“Matthew’s the person behind the restaging of Peter Bellamy’s *The Transports*, of course. This show is based on his book, *Human Cargo*, which tells the history of slavery in its many forms through folk songs. He came to see me at

Sidmouth, where I was presenting a multimedia show on my parents’ work. He chose me to be the other half of the *Human Cargo* show, which he wanted to perform around the country, having done it with friends locally in London.”

Did that present Jeff with the task of learning a lot of new songs for the show? “Fortunately not. Matthew has a very flexible, responsive approach. It’s not like working to a script. Every show is different. There might be something fresh from the headlines. He always has local elements which he researches for each show – stories about local people who had connections to the slave trade; slave owners; abolitionists; victims of slavery. In the same way, he worked with the material I was already able to offer. I wouldn’t have been happy to learn and perform songs that I wouldn’t have sung under any other circumstances.”

“Essentially, I went through my repertoire and said, ‘Here are the 30 or so songs that make reference to struggle, future, hope and so on.’ Naturally, they are mostly religious songs because when people didn’t have a lot of hope in this realm, they went to church; they aspired to something better beyond, a future land and a future world where things would be redeemed. Matthew took those songs and wove around them the stories he wanted to tell, whether they be from 1600 or 1830 or the present day. He is very good at that, that particular skill of spotting relevance and context and connection. He’s a master at writing transitions.”

“So, the connection is not about the song illustrating the stories or the stories introducing the songs. The way it works is that Matthew will tell a story or a collection of stories, all factual of course, about oppression or suffering or struggle or, of course, of triumph over adversity. Then we step back to the music which very often, though not always, is about hope when all those trials will soon be over.”

Does that fit in with the concept of coded messages within religious songs about escaping the bonds of slavery? “Not in any literal sense. It’s not a viewpoint I personally subscribe to. I can see where it’s coming from, of course, and I’m sure in some cases it may have been true, but to speak about coded messages and so on assumes a level of connection

and collaboration that couldn’t possibly have been there. We are talking about people from a huge range of backgrounds – when people speak of being of African origin, they forget what a vast and varied place they are talking about, then as now.”

“Those people had different traditions, different cultures, vastly different beliefs, totally different languages. I’ve just read a history of the banjo by Laurent DuBois. He makes the point that the concept of Africa as a single entity is an American one. There was no Africa in the 1820s, just a vast land mass full of separate nations, tribes; even relatively nearby villages need not have contact. Africa was a purely geographical concept. In the same way, the banjo was not one instrument that came to America, but a rationalisation of many different instruments from across the continent. The notion of African culture as one thing is a construct.”

“On top of which, once Africans became slaves in the US, slave owners were at pains to avoid communication and voices of dissent from the outside. Slaves had no religious training till the 1850s either. That first happened when white folks started to take them along to hear visiting Methodist preachers or attend Camp meetings. I suspect it was in the belief that Christianity would make them better people, and also make them accept their earthly lot in the hope of a heavenly future. They probably also knew that a message of salvation through suffering kind of fitted in with the way they operated. It was definitely hope beyond the veil of tears, beyond this life, rather than beyond the Mason-Dixon line.”

“I think the other view is too post-modern. Of course, all songs are capable of having secondary and tertiary levels of meaning, which is one reason we relate to folk music that isn’t from our time or place. But the simple fact is there was not the level of communication between slave communities to permit it to happen.”

On the subject of shared cultures, Jeff’s album includes a version of a well-known hymn, *Beautiful Life*, which he performs in an Amish style - not the way we are used to hearing it. How important is style in his approach to performing traditional music? Does he see himself as a sharer of styles?

“That’s a huge topic, of course. It’s partly because I am consumed by sense of traditional styles. Style, in that context, means something different from how people normally perceive it. The first reference to local ‘folk styles’ I know of was by Charles Seeger during the Depression. He was trying to reintroduce music back into rural communities which had been devastated or disintegrated. He believed you could take a folk song in an urban setting and enable people to reclaim it. He passed that spirit on to his son, Mike Seeger. Aside from people who had become known from within the tradition, like Leadbelly or Jean Ritchie, The New Lost City Ramblers, which Mike formed, was the first act to try to perform folk music for a wider, urban audience with a sense of preserving traditional rural styles.”

“Mike’s step-brother Pete had grown weary at this point of doing precisely the opposite of that with The Weavers – ‘Singing folk songs in a suit and tie’, as he put it, literally and metaphorically. This is an American thing, particularly, because the recording of traditional singers was a late phenomenon over there. People like Alan Lomax and my parents were almost too late on the scene to capture it sonically.”

“The situation is different in the UK where sound recordings of traditional singers stretch right back to 1906. If a British folk singer wanted to hear how a rural singer had done a song, there were examples that spanned the decades right back to the invention of recording. Revivalists like Martin Carthy, Nic Jones or Peter Bellamy could go back and hear how a song had been done before deciding how they wanted to do it.”

I’m reminded of something that Almeda Riddle said to my parents: “You have to get behind the song.” By that she meant you should not let your performance or personality get in the way of a song. The song is the message, not the singer.”

I’ve just realised what a range of topics we’ve covered. How on earth am I going to sum this up?

“I have a quote,” offers Jeff. “It’s from David McCulloch, a singer my brother once interviewed on film: ‘It’s our job to make history as interesting as it was.’”

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