

EVERY SONG HAS A STORY

Chico Schwall and friends perform early British folk tunes at The Shedd

A century ago, Englishman Cecil Sharp came to the U.S. looking for British folk songs he first collected in the U.K.

“And he found tons of them,” says Eugene musician **Chico Schwall**.

This was part of a movement to record such music before it died off for good — first with pen and paper, and then, as recording technology improved, with aluminum disks and magnetic tape.

On Wednesday, Oct. 17, the latest installment of Schwall’s American Roots concert series will focus on this music preserved by anthologists like Sharp and, most famously, Alan Lomax. The concert is called *Bonaparte’s Retreat* after a wordless melody existing since at least the late 1800s.

In the 1920s, Schwall explains, the Library of Congress started the Archive of American Folk Song, which would later become the American Folklife Center and now the Archive of Folk Culture. “All the sudden if you’re interested in researching this stuff there was a place to put it,” he adds. “There was an interest in it. People that initially funded it were donors to classical music.”

In the 1930s, the Works Progress Administration, more popularly known as the WPA, also set off to capture this quickly fading culture.



“They said, how are we going to create an American classical music if we don’t know what American folk music is?” Schwall explains.

Performing with Schwall on banjo, guitar, piano, mandolin and bass are Eugene musicians **Elizabeth Cable**, **Corwin Bolt** and **Samuel Mitchell**. Tunes performed will include “The Wife of Usher’s Well,” a song that Schwall says goes all the way back to when there was friction between Christianity and sorcery.

Also performed will be “Another Man Done Gone,” popularized by The Animals and Mose Allison, as well as “Worried Life Blues,” a few spirituals and much more.

When selecting the songs to include, Schwall says, he starts with what grabs him.

“When I do these concerts, I pick the songs to tell the story, or I frame the story around the songs,” he says. “It’s a narrative of American music. It is unavoidably personal. The strengths of the people I get to work with drive the direction too.”

Most of all, Schwall hopes to present this old music in the context of its own time. “Any piece of music, like any piece of literature has a story,” he says. ■

Bonaparte’s Retreat is 7:30 pm Wednesday, Oct. 17, in the Sheffer Recital Hall at The Shedd; \$15-\$19 with student discounts available, all-ages.

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