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# MIZZOU

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## Jeffersonian Spirit

MU history professor Steven Watts wins prestigious award.



Steven Watts stands by one of the side entrances to the Playboy Mansion in 2009. In addition to writing a biography of Hugh Hefner, Watts has covered Walt Disney, Henry Ford and Dale Carnegie. Photo by Alison Reynolds.

*Story by Kelsey Allen*

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**T**homas Jefferson's influence on Steven Watts is obvious.

After earning a bachelor's degree in 1975 from MU, Watts attended Jefferson's University of Virginia in Charlottesville before coming back to Mizzou for his doctorate. The first two books he wrote were about America's formative years, which made writing about Jefferson kind of hard to avoid, and since 1984, he has taught the survey of American history course at MU. Watts, BA '75, PhD '84, and wife Patti Sokolich Watts, BA, BJ '89, M Ed '97, even built their own Victorian version of Monticello on a 54-acre farm in north Columbia.

On May 1, the MU history professor was surprised with the Thomas Jefferson Award, one of the most prestigious awards in the University of Missouri System. Given to a faculty member who achieves distinction in teaching, research, writing, creative activities and service, the award — and a \$10,000 cash prize — will be presented by UM President Tim Wolfe at the Board of Curators meeting June 13.

“I think one of the reasons that I've always secretly coveted this award actually is that to me it is the best reflection of what we do as faculty,” Watts says. “A lot of the other [awards] are just for teaching or just for research. This one covers the gamut, so it means a lot to me.”

In addition to teaching, Watts has become known for his biographies on some of the 20th century's most influential figures, including Walt Disney, Henry Ford, Hugh Hefner, and most recently, Dale Carnegie.

It all started on a trip to Disney World with his wife in the early 1990s. Watts was fascinated by the people vacationing at the park and was struck by the influence Disney has had on American life.

“I got this bee in my bonnet,” Watts says. “I got really interested in modern American culture and this construct of the 20th century culture of consumerism and self-fulfillment. In their own way, each of the people I’ve written about has contributed greatly to that. They all build one upon the other, but it all stemmed from that moment at Disney World.”

Like Jefferson, who also had interests in science, education, law and architecture, Watts is more than a professor. He plays tennis five days a week; manages his garden and orchard; and tries to keep up with his 7-year-old daughter.

He plays guitar and keyboard and sings in the local band Big Muddy. Along with two other Tigers — Soren Larsen, associate professor of geography; and Heidi Harmelink, director of developmental research — the band covers artists such as Tom Petty and the Allman Brothers and occasionally play a few Big

Muddy originals.

“One thing I’ve always admired about [Jefferson] was that breadth of activity,” Watts says. “He was fully engaged with the broad issues of his day, not only politically but also scientifically, culturally and socially.”

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