

CAROLINA REEL

by Ronald Frame

Everyone who's able to take to the floor does so, while the rest sit and tap their toes.

"Jock Urquhart's Reel Deal" are just what they claim to be. Nobody ever goes away after one of these ceilidh evenings feeling they've been sold short.

The band travels the length and breadth of Scotland, and also down into the North of England, working forty-five weeks in the year. For Urquhart four weeks in total are given over to his family. The other three are spent back-packing, usually by himself.

He needs to hear other kinds of music, and see different places. He finds it hard to explain. Writing most of the tunes which the band plays, he's continually looking for inspiration. He's found it in Marseilles, in Tallinn, in Fez, even in Mysore. The trick is then to integrate what he's heard into his own Scottish country dance music.

Not to frighten off their audiences, it's mostly Scottish towns which feature in the lyrics of his songs. He must have used up half the names in the gazeteer by now.

*She could play as softly as a whisper, he discovered, quieter than a murmur of breeze or the lick of a flame.*

Carnbeg has been included several times. It would be strange if it wasn't, because he has always been popular here. The band has appeared at the big hotels—the Hydro and the Sgian Palace especially—

as well as at the Jubilee Theatre and the New Tennis Club clubhouse and assorted church halls, wherever there's been enough space for dancing.

Tonight they're back at the Hydro. It's a wedding reception. Wedding guests are easy to please. They want the familiar dances and tunes. So "Jock Urquhart's Reel Deal" gives them exactly that: The Dashing White Sergeant to "My Love She's But A Lassie Yet," The Lomond Waltz to "Neath the Shade of the Old Apple Tree," The Gay Gordons to "Campbell's Farewell to Red Castle." The dancing becomes increasingly spirited and less precise.

"Carolina Reel" someone calls out. Another person repeats the request, but minding their p's and q's. "Yes. The Carolina Reel, please!"

Urquhart nods at and Calum and Hughie and Ken for what to strike up next. Okay, The Carolina Reel it is.



Back in 1960 Jock Urquhart—John Urquhart, as he appeared on the personnel lists—was playing second violin in an orchestra, and at twenty-three still nursed ambitions to be a soloist.

He got leave and went to America in the late spring of that year because neither of his parents could envisage making that long journey to his spinster great-aunt's funeral. Andrina Kinning was, or had been, his mother's only aunt. When she turned forty, she

suddenly upped sticks and headed west, and no one at home could understand it, except to hint that possibly “love” (spoken sotto voce) might have drawn her there.

In Milwaukee Urquhart found that Great-Aunt Andrina had indeed been sharing her life, unbeknown to the rest of her family. Her bereaved partner was now past seventy: a woman, called Denise.

“Andy told me many times she couldn’t have lived like this where she came from.”

Nor was the funeral the sort Urquhart was used to in Scotland. It was more like a wake. There was music, and very lively and cheerful it was too. Urquhart was particularly taken by the fiddler and the banjo-plucker. They played, heads down, as if their own breathing lives depended on it; their fingers moved so quickly, Urquhart could only see a blur.

It transpired that Great-Aunt Andrina and her other-half used to take vacations in the Alleghenies, and that was how they’d first encountered bluegrass music, on the borderland of North Carolina and Virginia. Once they’d heard it, Denise said, from then on they were hooked. They had gotten to know Charlie and Skid just recently, but they were close to them like old way-back friends.

For Urquhart nothing was as he could have predicted on this visit to the States, his first, and when Charlie offered to drive him down the highway he accepted very gladly. He didn’t want to leave the pair at Chicago, and just carried on with them, all the remaining seven hundred miles south.

Charlie wouldn’t hear of him staying anywhere else but at home with him and his young family.

The accommodation was simple, as their passenger had been warned in advance. But when Urquhart woke the next morning, even though he was sore from the hard mattress and with a chill on him, he felt he wasn’t the person who’d arrived in the dark and gone to bed eight or nine hours ago. What he saw through the window, a ring of blue mountains with a green valley spread beneath them, took his breath away. As the day wore on, he felt uncomplicated, in one sense. Nobody knew him here, he wasn’t expected to be this or that. Even after a long musical education and apprenticeship, and two or three rungs up the professional ladder already, he felt the need to learn new skills.

The house was half-way up an alp, and called “High Life.”

Two stories, boarded walls, a stoep, shallow shingle-roof.

“This is real fancy compared with where I saw light of day,” Charlie’s young wife Eula told him.

She was a middle child of nine, brought up at the end of a long, long dirt track far beyond Asheville. Her father had been a tanner, and he stank, except on Sundays.

She could play banjo, fiddle, and squeezebox. As a little girl she used to listen to her heroes on radio: Flatt and Scruggs, Bill Monroe, the Stanley Brothers. When Charlie was away one afternoon and the house was empty of everyone else, she showed their guest.

Urquhart realised Eula was a better musician than her husband. That must mean she was better than any of the musicians Charlie knew, since he was acknowledged to have no equal between here and Point Pleasant in one direction and Powhatan in the other. Urquhart was fascinated. She was even faster on the runs, and in the slow tunes she seemed to be living inside them.

He asked her why she didn’t play with Charlie. She avoided giving him a straight an-

swer, but he could guess the reason. Because she didn't want to embarrass her husband.

"We have an arrangement," she said.

"You do?"

"Promise me you won't tell a living soul."

"I promise."

"I feel I can talk to a stranger."

She took a deep breath.

She'd got mixed up with someone her father knew, Bill, a fellow musician and family friend. When he was driving her home from Winston-Salem, where she had a spot playing her instruments on a Saturday morning TV show, he suddenly turned off the road beneath trees and proceeded to have his way with her. She was still fourteen years old: fifteen when she had the baby.

"My mother would have given it away, and my father didn't believe my story anyway. Charlie was my knight on a white charger. We got wed, he gave me a home, and in return I taught him everything I knew about bluegrass."

Urquhart asked what happened to the no-good who'd caused all the misfortune.

"I expect he found another family to be friendly with. I think he was jealous of me. He said my smiles confused him. But on TV and stage you have to smile, kids anyhow, or they won't invite you back."

He wondered why she didn't seem angry or bitter.

"For music you have to keep light. The music saved me. Mac Wiseman, and Molly O'Day, and seeing the Blue Sky Brothers at the TV studio. And Charlie saved me, of course."

He asked her when she managed to play.

"Just whenever I need to."

She could play as softly as a whisper, he discovered, quieter than a murmur of breeze or the lick of a flame. She was able to let him hear a whole dance through, and no one else in the house would have guessed she was plucking banjo strings.

The fiddle and the accordion were for when she had the house to herself, and she could deaden sound with the shutters drawn.

It struck Urquhart that she must be the most remarkable person he had ever met. Famous names had come and performed with the orchestra, but he couldn't have imagined them being able to do without attention and approval and applause, without any recognition at all.

The light of her talent was hidden beneath a bushel, and the bushel beneath the blackest black of an Appalachian night sky.

Urquhart watched Eula with the children, three of them and already another on the way, and compared her with how she appeared in the framed oval photograph on the wall.

He watched how Charlie, without ever being rude, simply took his wife and helpmate for granted.

He saw how closely Eula listened when the talk was about the music Charlie and Skid had heard on their travels, and how her eyes lit up when they said they'd bumped into Carl Story or Hobo Jack Adkins, and how her fingers—down by the sides of her chair, and concealed from them—worked invisible strings or keys to accompany the two men.

He noticed how she would correct her husband on some detail or other, but with

her voice pitched low so that only he could hear. He saw that she tapped very lightly on her swollen belly, so that the baby growing inside wasn't excluded and—just as she had been—would be born with an innate sense of rhythm.

Urquhart continued to be amazed, by the fact that Eula was so unamazed by herself.

A letter arrived for the Scotsman, bearing a Glasgow frank mark. It came not from Sheena, his fiancée, but from his friend Dunc.

Dunc said he was wanting to drop a timely warning in his old amigo's ear, that was all. Sheena, he thought, was receiving some unwelcome attention. She'd been up in Perthshire, staying with second cousins in Carnbeg, and it was his guess that SOMEONE ELSE—another man—was trying to muscle in. Just some little things she'd let slip...

*How long ARE you going to be away?*

That jolted him.

In his mind Urquhart was back in Glasgow, even though it was North Carolina soil he had under his feet. Or he was in that not-so-innocuous Highlands resort town, Carnbeg, prowling for predatory men.

Scotland was an ocean away. Great-Aunt Andrina had come west to get away from its morality, and she never did go back.

If he were to stay on here ...

Eula seemed to intuit what he was he was thinking.

"Everyone has to make a choice," she told him.

"Except if you're fourteen, and fall foul of a family friend."

Eula winced at that, and Urquhart felt he'd misjudged the remark.

"I used to smile a lot," she said. "Bill got the wrong idea. There was nothing I could do. But I'm more careful these days."

The smile she attempted was a sad one. Urquhart wondered what he could do to remedy the situation. Women had fought through, like Molly or Wilma Lee, but very few. It would take something drastic maybe, a seismic shift in her landscape, and to hell and perdition with the consequences.

Moments later, in the awkward silence between them, Urquhart realised that he was too simple for her, too unsophisticated. She deserved better than Charlie, but she also deserved better than him.

"I'll teach you a little tune," she said. "I was working through chords when I was wringing out."

He was imagining something slow, reflective. But it was a jig, in 2/4 time. She called it "Kettle on the Stove." A bright, nothing-to-worry-us sort of tune, which your feet were dying to dance.

Her eyes shone. No, tears would have been too obvious. Her silver-blue pupils shone with alpine daylight, with the complicated job of what couldn't be put into words.

Somewhere Charlie's pick-up was puttering on the last stretch of chicane track home.

Up here meanwhile, nearly at the cloud line, these moments were being wrapped up and freeze-dried inside a hoedown tune.



Urquhart returned home to Scotland. He and Sheena married.

Sheena was keen for them to get on in the world.

To provide some extra income, Urquhart joined a well-known accordionist's touring group, playing fiddle. Some jobs were trouser jobs (the orchestra), others were kilted (the band).

Sheena gave birth to four children in nine years.

By the time of the last, Urquhart had broken away and formed his own band. The ceilidh music paid a better wage than the orchestra, and he took it up full-time. The drawback was the travelling; instinct, a sixth sense, kept him from staying away from home for longer than a week at a time. As he put it, in jokey fashion, he wanted to be back to give the lawn its trim, couldn't let the grass grow under his feet!

There was enough work for the "Reel Deal" without going abroad, although invitations came from Canada, from Australia, from Scandinavia, even from Russia. Music was universal. Enquiries from the United States were answered, but "no" was intended to mean "no," however politely it was expressed.

Years later, over a third dram of whiskey, Urquhart's old friend Dunc told him he had a confession to make.

Remember that letter he once sent to him in America, about Sheena? He hadn't really believed it, had he? All the Carnbeg stuff? He and Sheena had thought it up between them. Sheena was bored, not having him around. She reckoned that anything which appealed to a man's jealousy would bring him to heel.

Ha ha ha!

Urquhart smiled, a tight fixed smile—but, no, he wasn't laughing.

Two hundred and fifty? Three hundred?

How many times had they played The Carolina Reel?

Other bands set it to "Turkey in the Straw" or "Yankee Doodle" or "Old MacDonald had a Farm" or "I Come from Alabama." The "Reel Deal" did it their way, to a tune Jock Urquhart had brought back with him from America long ago, called "Kettle on the Stove."

It's a set dance for four couples, and the company will divide themselves into groups. Advance, retire, advance, retire; turn, turn, turn; dos-e-doh; swing to bottom of the set; two-arm turns. And on it goes.

At some point Urquhart, up on stage, is absent. He's in the kitchen of a gimcrack wooden house on a steep slope between Roaring Gap and South Fork, hearing the modest tune for the first time.

Always he comes back, to the dancehall where he's standing center-stage, with fiddle beneath his chin. For a few seconds he has the same sense that the past forty-five years have been a dream, they've never really happened. The dream of a dream is only a day-dream itself, however. Feet are stamping rowdily, voices are heuching up to the ceiling.

"Repeat!" Jock Urquhart throws his voice, reminding them. "New couple at top, to come through!"