

John Carmichael

By Karyn McCulloch

John Carmichael is one of the most popular and highly respected musicians in the Scottish Music scene today. Not only is he a tremendous "box" player, he is one of the "characters" in the business - and can entertain audiences for hours with his stories and jokes (some of which we couldn't possibly print!). John will be a Guest of Honour at the Association's AGM in June 2004. So how and where did it all start? Brought up in Glasgow, John's interest in music came from his Mum, who sang and played piano. She had also played in a dance band "up north" during the 1920s, so John grew up hearing music and used to listen to the Scottish Dance Bands on the radio - mainly Jimmy Shand. It wasn't until he was about fifteen that he realised there were other bands - like Bobby MacLeod - and started listening to them too. John began piano lessons when he was about nine years old - taught by a relation of his Mum's. However these were simple, straightforward piano lessons - no "Scottishy" stuff. Unfortunately, he didn't get very far because - by his own admission - he just didn't practise enough. However he did manage to learn to read music and could play scales and knew about fingering techniques. A few years later when he was about sixteen years old, Ian MacLean - his pal from school, who was "mad about the box" - got an accordion for his Christmas, but he couldn't play it. John - who had never thought about the accordion before - had a go and managed to get his fingers moving around the keyboard and could play the "odd wee bit" of a tune. Ian went for lessons, so both pals learned together, using the one accordion. Eventually John got an accordion of his own - an old second hand "clapped out thing" which he bought in Chisholm & Hunters at Glasgow Cross. (He jokes: "Put £2 down and change your address!"). John frequently went on holiday to Skye with Ian - who was originally from there - and they attended the various dances in places such as Portree. They were still under the age for drinking, but the "Highland Dancing" was the place they could hear all the great tunes and listen to the different bands, such as the Michie Brothers or Roddy Urquhart. At this point they became "fanatical" about the music. Ian was still going for lessons, but just couldn't get to grips with the bass end at all, although he could play all kinds of tunes on the right

hand. John used to practise at home on his own accordion and managed to play the right hand, the left hand AND work the bellows - all at the same time! He also had the advantage of being able to read music, which helped him to learn new tunes. The first public performance for John and Ian was at the Cardonald Highlanders, in Mosspark, Glasgow, in the late 1950s. They could only play one tune - The Atholl Highlanders - so they played it twice, once each! John recalls being "absolutely terrified" before he went on stage!

John kept teaching himself until he was about nineteen. By this time he was now into engineering, but he went to Archie Duncan for some lessons. Archie "took him in hand" and the first thing he told him to do was to change his fingering technique on the bass end. He was given a book called "The Mastery of the Basses" which contained loads of bass exercises. John worked away diligently, practising for hours, until he had successfully changed his left hand fingering - in fact he was "quite delighted with himself".

He learned so much from Archie - both with what he had taught him and just by watching him playing. However, those lessons lasted only about a year, as he was too busy with his engineering to spend time practising.

John and Ian and another couple of pals went regularly to the "Highland Dancing" (now known as Ceilidh Dancing) in places like Govan Town Hall, The Kingston Halls, or The Highlanders Institute (where Bobby MacLeod played on a Monday night). Out of all the bands they heard, the one that stood out from the rest was called "Andy MacColl's Band". John recalls, "The place just came alive when he played." Although this band would never broadcast, they were the band that got all the gigs in the area! "Real beltin' stuff - he played in the full 5 voices all the time!" The lads learned more listening to this band with regards to the popular tunes and which tunes to play for dancing. (Sadly, Ian was later killed in army service.)

Around 1962, when Ivor Britton won the Scottish Championship at Perth, John caught the competition bug. In 1963 he had a go at the competition, but didn't get anywhere. However, he decided to try again the following year. The night before the competition, his wife (Freena) had

been taken into hospital, as she was due to have their first baby. John went to the hospital in the morning but was told that "nothing would happen today", so Freena told him to go up to Perth - after all, he had been practising for a whole year! So he went along and played in the afternoon - and got through to the final at night. Now he had a dilemma! He had planned to go home after the afternoon competitions, but now that he was into the final, that meant he had to stay for the evening concert. So he phoned the hospital - and discovered that he was now the proud father of a baby girl! After a celebratory drink or two (or three!) he wanted to go back down to Glasgow and see his new daughter - but his pals wouldn't let him. They told him to "get into that final". So he stayed - and WON the All Scotland Accordion Championship at Perth - the same day his wife gave birth to their first daughter.

Nowadays, John can often be seen at the other side of the stage - in the adjudicator's chair. He has been involved in many competitions, adjudicating at Perth and Musselburgh, as well as Blairgowrie and Gretna. He adjudicated with Charlie Cowie at the West of Scotland Championship (when this was run by Jock Loch).

Then they played at the dance at night with the band. John has no particular favourite band or player, simply because the scene is changing all the time and so many new ones keep appearing. However his favourite fiddler of all time has to be the late Charlie Cowie. His sense of harmony was second to none - there are others who are terrific players, but they all have a different style to Charlie's.

A lot of band work followed John's success at Perth in 1964 and he played mainly in Andrew Rankine's band for a while although he did a few "odds and ends" with Bobby MacLeod. Then he moved with his family to Australia for about four years. This was with his job though - he didn't play much while over there. He remembers people flocking to various venues whenever a Scottish tour would come over - bands like Jimmy Shand or Ian Powrie.

By the time their second child was due, it was decided that Freena would come home to Scotland to have the baby and visit some relatives, then she would go back after the baby was born.

After she had arrived home, John had one of his "moments of madness" and he flew back home too, as he had about four months of leave to take. A few weeks after arriving back in Scotland, he was in Edinburgh and happened to meet Jim Johnstone. Jim was desperately looking for a second box player to join his band as they were going on tour with The White Heather Club. They discussed this and found that John had enough time to do the tour before he was due to go back to work in Australia - however John thought he'd better check with his wife first! She said it would be fine and John decided to do the tour - he spent the next fourteen weeks in Brighton with The White Heather Club. John was "hooked" on music again and he thought, "There's no way I'm goin' back doon the engine room!" He resigned from his engineering job and worked regularly with The Jim Johnstone Band. After a while the work began to "fizzle out" - and so did his income. He had a wife and two kids to support -and a mortgage to pay. At this point, he "went back to school" -to teach (he had been a teacher before going to sea as an engineer). He still did the odd gig while he was teaching, but this work restricted the number of gigs he could do.

However a TV job came up with Calum Kennedy. Although he was a bit nervous about it, John decided to do the "Round at Calum's" series for Grampian TV. In between all this, he still found time to do some gigs with people like Andrew Rankine and Jim Johnstone, as well as doing a lot on his own with Calum Kennedy and Alasdair Gillies.

In the early 1970s, while he was working as a Principal Guidance teacher in a Glasgow school, he was offered another TV series with Alasdair Gillies - in CANADA. He now had four kids, a wife and a mortgage - another dilemma! He was only about thirty years old then and was really keen to pursue music - but he had a steady job and there was the potential to become an assistant head teacher within five or six years. He had already been turning down TV work due to his teaching commitments, although his band was still working. A decision was made and he "chucked the teaching"!

He went to Canada to do the TV series and fortunately didn't need to up sticks and move the whole family. He went across for three weeks at a time, did fifteen-twenty programmes and then came back home for a few months. This was a very good job -and it also allowed him plenty of time in Scotland where he was involved with many of the Scottish theatre shows that were becoming very popular.

Then a few months later it would be back to Canada to film another series of the

"telly's". The Cape Breton Fiddlers were resident on the show -who were little known here at that time.

Although the programme was only to run for two years, John was able to get many of the most popular Scottish entertainers booked onto the show - people like Moira Anderson, Calum Kennedy, the Alexander Brothers, Alistair MacDonald. In fact, at this point Stan Hamilton had been living in Canada for around twenty years (although he was originally from Ayr) - and he had never been on TV. John spoke to "the bosses" and managed to get him onto the show! John was a full time musician from 1972 until 1988. His very first band consisted of himself on lead accordion; his late brother-in-law Bobby McNeillie (who used to play with Ian Holmes) on second box; David Whitehead (who played with Bobby MacLeod) on piano; and Johnny Cooper on drums.

In the mid 1980s the line up changed and there was John on lead box; Charlie Cowie on fiddle (Marie Fielding joined when Charlie died); John Crawford on piano; John Sinton / Eoin Miller on bass; and Billy Thorn (the "Prince of Percussion") on drums. From time to time Duncan Findlay joined them playing guitar and banjo. This line up stayed the same until a few years ago.

The current line up is John on lead box; Alan Kitchen on piano; Angie MacEachern (Smith) on fiddle; and John Sinton on bass. He doesn't have a regular drummer at the moment, but he can call on people like Billy Thom or Stevie Beattie when a drummer is required.

As John's band plays at many different functions, from ceilidhs to weddings, the band has had to be able to play much more than just the normal "teuchter" stuff. They have incorporated other styles into their repertoire, which have included quicksteps, the Hucklebuck and the Slosh. (Although at weddings people tend to get "Sloshed" rather than dance it!).

John's first overseas trip with music was in the early 70s for the TV series in Canada. Towards the end of the series -around 1972/73- he received a phonecall "out of the blue" from Jimmy Shand. "Are you busy around Easter time, son? Have you got a lot on? How dae ye fancy coming oot tae Australia wi' me?" he asked. John checked his diary (thinking it would only be for a week or so) and said it would be OK. The tour of Australia and New Zealand lasted seven weeks! They did have a rehearsal though -John went to meet Jimmy and they played a few tunes - that was the practice!

John remembers that tour - the most prestigious arena they played in was the Sydney Opera House. The band included

Jimmy and John on accordions, Walter Sinton on piano (brother of bass player John - mentioned earlier) and Ian Powrie on fiddle. The bass player, drummer and guitarist were all Australian musicians. The Alexander Brothers were also in the show, but they were not on stage for the opening - they were on later. When the show started, Jimmy wasn't on stage - it began with John standing in front of the band playing the opening tune. Then the announcement came over the speakers, "Ladies and Gentleman, please welcome the legendary Jimmy Shand". Jimmy walked onto the stage with his Shand Morino and the place erupted. Everyone was standing up, clapping, cheering, whistling - the noise was deafening. John wondered how this reputedly calm man would react to this - would he panic?

The crowd were still going mad and Jimmy leaned over to John and said, "I wish they would stop that son, tae we get a wee tune, eh".

Since then John has toured Australia four times with Jimmy Shand and Andy Stewart, he has been to Canada and America with Andy, Calum and Alasdair Gillies and has visited just about every other country you can think of, from Iceland to Germany, Holland to Jordan. Not to mention playing for two "Monsoon Ceilidhs" in Bombay, various other American visits to California and Boston (this year will be his fifth time). He also spent eight years going to Kuwait (twice a year) and nine years going to Abu Dhabi (three times a year), John -if you're ever looking for a change of job, you could become a travel agent!

As well as jetting all over the world, he has somehow managed to find the time to record over sixty albums which include around ten with his own band, fifteen with The Star Accordion Band, fifteen with The Box and Banjo Band, some with The Riverside Ceilidh Band - and many more!

He made his first radio broadcast with his band in the early 1970s, although he had been playing on many Gaelic radio programmes during the 1960s. He also managed to play for ten years in the summer season at Butlins, as well as being musical director for The Jim Macleod Big Band, which has been running for a few years now.

The accordion John plays most at the moment is a 2 voice, 60 bass Salterelle, although he has another two "spares" -a Pignini and a Fratelli. His first accordion was a Bellini - but his first brand new accordion was a Hohner Atlantic (which took him "forever to pay up!"). On Northern Nights, he played a Gabonelli (although it had Cruicianelli on the front of it) - he had the reeds specially adapted to suit his music. John's son Iain now has

this accordion. Although all four of John's kids went to Jimmy Blair for accordion lessons, Iain is the only one who still plays - and he now lives in Hong Kong! Iain is kept fairly busy with his playing - especially around St Andrew's night when he is flown to places like Singapore, Korea, Taiwan, Shanghai and Bangkok. He also plays for various country dances in the area. John's eldest daughter Fiona (who is now in the police force) won the Junior Championship and is always "threatening" to start playing again.

John has also been involved in teaching the accordion - having been enlisted to assist at the Jimmy Blair Accordion School and he spent almost a year teaching at Robert Rolston's Music Academy in Bellshill.

As most people know, John is no stranger to television work - both in front of the cameras as well as behind the scenes as a producer. Some of the TV programmes he worked on (in front of the camera) include Thingummyjig, Sounds Gaelic, Double Bill, Round at Calums' and Northern Nights. In 1988, John went back into TV production and was there until 2003.

However, in the early days of Thingummyjig, (where he worked on both sides of the camera) he remembers being so nervous that his hands would be shaking while he was waiting to start (in front of the camera). Not only was he nervous about his own performance, but also not knowing how it would sound - if the balance would be OK. There was never any "settling in time" on the TV broadcasts - as soon as you were on set you had to start. Sight-reading was an extremely important part of this, especially when the band had to accompany a singer - most of the time the band didn't see the music until the singer was ready to start! Some readers might wonder how a non-classically trained "simple box player" could be a bandleader, musical director and the likes? John's answer, "Keep your eyes and ears open and learn - and keep your mouth shut until the right moment!"

John was the producer of Northern Nights as well as being the lead accordionist in the "house band". One day he was asked how he would go about getting a music show off the ground. He explained how he would do it and was then given three weeks to get the first series (around fifteen programmes) prepared. (No pressure, then?!). This new programme had to have a balance between the traditional dance band sound and the more modern "folksy" sound. Then he had to organise the "house band", book the guest artistes (two or three per show!), arrange for a set made, book the studio, book the cameras

and find a director - all in the space of five days, as it had to be finalised on the Friday. As if that wasn't bad enough, they had to film two shows per night! The first programme was recorded on a Monday night and while John was recording the second programme (on the Monday), his assistant was editing the first one as it was being screened on ITV on the Tuesday - the next night! As John said, if he hadn't been working on all these other programmes in the earlier years, he wouldn't have had the experience to be able to put this all together. Thank goodness for Thingummyjig, eh!

Looking to the future, John has no specific projects planned, but he has no intention of giving up - and he doesn't think he'll ever "lose the notion to play" (despite the odd "bad gig!"). There seem to be plenty of young players coming through to keep the music alive - and as long as there continues to be a platform for them to play from it should survive. John has noticed (as we all have) that this scene has a tendency to fluctuate and always will - but as long as the youngsters keep playing the music, it should improve. Of course, the styles of playing have changed so much and now there's the introduction of the "hundred mile an hour brigade". Still, some people appear to be able to dance to this, so maybe that'll be OK too.

One word of advice John has to anyone who plays the accordion: PRACTISE. Listen to other players that you like and pick up bits and try to develop your playing style. Also try to have goals - for example, "I want to record a CD" or "I want to do a radio broadcast with my band". Once you have set your goal keep practising towards that. Other than that, just try to have a sense of humour and smile sometimes!

John has been "very fortunate" to have been able to travel to so many different places and meet and work with so many people - all thanks to music. In his own words, he has had "a very exciting life". And now that he's "out of the woods" after a health scare, we can carry on listening to John Carmichael's music - and stories!