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People weekly

How 'Roots' has changed the lives of its cast

Skiing Kennedys

Paul Newman at 180 mph

Rod Stewart & Britt Ekland

A sexy Swede tames the rascal of rock

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Given to undue reserve neither in dress nor decor, Britt Ekland and Rod Stewart flaunt it in their Art Nouveau L.A. Home.

LISTEN, BRITT, THE WORLD IS PLAYING OUR SONG, SAYS ROMANTIC ROD: IT'S 'TONIGHT'S THE NIGHT'

In his first three decades of low life, Rod Stewart proved Oscar Wilde's theorem that the only sure way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. He roislered through a netherworld of syb-aritic tours, groupies and booze while singing with a half-dozen bands. Along the way he rasped out a string of hits, peaking with 1971's *Maggie May*, that put him in a league with Mick Jagger as a preeminent rock vocalist. Yet at a flashed-out 30, Stewart was enough a black Scotsman to predict, «I'll be dead by the time I'm 40 ».

Instead, at 32, he's alive, more or less domesticated and unconscionably well off in the quiet Holmby Hills section of Los Angeles, where one of his neighbors is Barbra Streisand, Credit for Stewart's pacification, as unlikely as it may seem, belongs to Swedish actress Britt Ekland, 34.

She is better know as a sexy blond superstarlet and the catalyst for Rod's record-breaking 1976 hit, T*onight's the Night*. But during the two years the couple has lived together she has also shown herself to be gently adept at raising not only her two children from previous liaisons but her manchild lover as well. « I was lazy. » Rod says. « When Britt came along, she said « You're wasting your talent ». She gave me a kick in the ass. » For her part, Britt believes she gave Stewart « more self-confidence than he had before ». She also does not argue when Rod says, « As conceited as it sounds, I've probably made her happier than any other man she's ever known ».

That's some boast. At 21, Britt married no less an international ladie's man than Peter Sellers. (Two months into their marriage he had a heart attack - in bed - and they divorced four years later.). In 1971 she began a four-year live-in relationship with record producter Lou Adler. At other times, when not working-of her 25 films the least forgettable are *The Night They Raided Minsky's* and *The Man with the Golden Gun* - Britt has hung on such elegant arms as those of the Earl of Lichfied.

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Photographs by Steve Schapiro

CouplesCONTINUED

Once England's most eligible bachelor, and Italian Count Bino Cicogna.

Rod, though, makes Britt feel as if they're « the last of the great lovers, a contemporary Burton and Taylor, « as she once put it. The rock press has accordingly predicted their breakup more often than Beatle ruenions. « In the beginning we were more prone to fight, » Britt admits. « But the last six months have been extremely quiet. »

They do think occasional separations are good for them. It is just as Well, since Rod loathes movie sets and was so bored on location with Britt in the Philippines that he vowed never to go again. Later this month, however, she will join him on his Australian tour before wrapping up her latest film, *The Slavers,* in Rhodesia. Meantime they keep in touch by phone and Rod's sentimentally ribald wires. « Dear Britt, » one began. « Here is the romantic Telex you wanted. Missing you. Tired of wanking. Please come back now. Good looking me. » (Wanking is a Brithis vulgarism for masturbation.)

Roderick David Stewart's sometimes quite visible working-class roots go back to the Highgate section of London, where he was born to as Scottish builder and his wife. He was brought up listening to the American sounds of Al Jolson, Woody Guthrie and Sam Cooke. He made it through high school, and as a promising soccer wing, signed with a semipro league (while working part-time as a gravedigger). Instead of playing, however, he took off on a two-year hitchhiking tour of the Continent, «I could really only do two things », he recalls. « When I failed at soccer, I turned to music.»

Stewart's first job was blowing harmonica with Jimmy Powell's Five Dimensions as a warmup act for the Stones. Then, in spite of a voice that sounds as if he had been swallowing Brillo pads, he croaked his way to the top with, successively, the Hoochie Coochie Men, the Steam Packet Band, the Jeff Beck Band, the Small Faces, the Faces, Rod Steward and the Faces and now the Rod Stewart Band.

He also acquired a global reputation as a rock brat of epic proportions. Trashing hotel rooms and laying waste to battalions of lubricious groupies, he became the special delight of the so-called « plaster casters ».

Britt Ekland grew up in Stockholm, where her father owned a tweedy English-style haberdashery. « Until I was 13 or 14 I was very dumpy, very fat with big buck teeth, » she says. But with adolescence came beauty and her first movie parts in Italy and England. Of her marriage to Sellers, who was 17 years her senior, Britt shrugs, « I don't regret anything. Marriage seemed like the right thing to do then ». (Sellers sees his and Britt's daughter Victoria, now 12, during school holidays and on trips to L.A.) By the time a somewhat jaded Britt was living with Adler, she did not even consider marriage when she become pregnant with her second child, Nicholai. He is now 3½ and visits his father every weekend.

Britt and Stewart met in 1975 when she trailed him backstage at the L.A. Forum. « I ignored her », he remembers. « The second night she came back and I coudn't ignore that. »

Unlike such rock world arrivistes as Linda Eastman Mc Cartney and Yoko Ono Lennon, Britt cheerfully confesses, « It's regrettable, but I have no musical talent of any king ». She does acknowledge, though, doing « a little naughty whispering » on « Tonight's the Night » which Stewart wrote.

Because of tis prurient lyrics (« Spread your wings and let me come inside »), the record was temporarily banned last summer by the U.S. RKO radio chain and the BBC. That fuss combined with Edkland's breathy, amorous French and Rod's romantic rasp

Britt shotgunned then-husband Peters Sellers not into marriage but a tub in 1967's « The Bobo ». They divorced a year later.

Sometimes lapsing into androgynous rock theatrics, Stewart currently has a Bowie-ish red dye job on his light brown hair.

« We can be inside the house for a week and never leave », says Rod, exchanging a goodbye nuzzle with this Irish setter, King.

to give him his biggest hit ever. Its seven-week grip on the top of the charts was the longest since the Beatles' Hey Jude in 1968 and made moot the critics' charge that Stewart had become lazy and derivative, given to recycling Stones riffs and cliché rock melodies.

During the five months a year the couple lives in the U.S., they are attendeb by a Swedish nanny, Mexican housekeeper and part-time gardener. Recently a squad of exterminators swarmed through the attic fighting a colony of rats - « or very large mice, » Britt suggests hopefully. Tony Toon, their publicist, lives in a guesthouse on the property. Fond of nicknames, Britt and Rod refer to him as « Annabelle ». Britt calls Rod « Soddy », a British pejorative; his Nicknames for her are unrepeatable.

They are a sought-after social attraction in California but usually send their regrets. « We're phenomenally private, » says Rod. On the rare occasions they do go out, it's the foppish Stewart who makes Britt wait « until I'm dressed to we can be coordinated. »

Instead of entertaining, she spends weekends riding palominos with Victoria. (She's also an expert skier). Rod Plays a rugged brand of soccer with Old chums like Rolling Stones guitarist Ron Wood, late of Faces. Both Rod and Britt remain close to their families abroad and visit his parents in London often. Perhaps unexpectedly, Britt Finds that Rod gets along famously with Victoria and Nicholai. « It has nothing to do with authority », she says. « It has to do with being silly, loose, more like a crazy friend ».

It is hard to foretell whether either of them would consider marriage - let alone to each other. « Eventually, » Rod Figures. « I'm a great one to do it to-Morrow. » Says the older and wiser Britt, « For us it is one giant carousel. We don't lead a normal life. »

ROBERT WINDELER

Britt sees son Nicholai off to nursery school. She tries to keep him and daughter Victoria out of the celebrity whirl.