

# Brendan Croker obituary

**Singer, songwriter and guitarist who shared his love of country and blues in the Notting Hillbillies**

**Robin Denselow**

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Brendan Croker performing in The Hague in 1988. He built up a following in continental Europe by touring with Belgian and French acts. Photograph: Frans Schellekens/Redferns

In 1986, when Mark Knopfler decided he wanted a break from playing the stadiums and arenas of the world with Dire Straits, he co-founded a cheerful, classy and eclectic band called the Notting Hillbillies, with whom he could explore his love of country and blues. In the new band were two other fine guitarists – Steve Phillips and Brendan Croker.

Brendan, who has died aged 70 after complications from leukaemia, was also a remarkable singer and songwriter. As Knopfler put it, “he could sing you the entire Lead Belly songbook, deep country blues, jug band music, Jimmie Rodgers, Hank Williams, calypso and reggae. It was like having someone like Taj Mahal in the band. Also he had vocal range; he could be crooning like Slim Harpo one minute and grinding out a Howlin’ Wolf the next.”

Brendan played a crucial role with the Hillbillies. Their only album, *Missing ... Presumed Having a Good Time* (1990), included his song *That’s Where I Belong*, along with material by Lead Belly, [Charlie Rich](#) and the Louvin Brothers. On stage he added banter and a wild sense of humour. A musicians’ musician, he had already built up a following with his band

Brendan Croker & the 5 O'Clock Shadows, and his admirers included Eric Clapton and Chet Atkins.

He was born in Bradford to Michael, a Scot who worked as an administrator for a mail order company, and Eileen (nee Donovan), an Irish woman who was a quality controller at a woollen mill. After secondary school in Bradford, he took a foundation course in fine art at Bradford College, followed by a degree in fine art at Sheffield School of Art.

Fascinated by music since being given a guitar as a child, he took a series of jobs before becoming a full-time musician. He worked as a railway guard, a bin man, and in a Sheffield scissor factory before, in 1975, becoming a scenic artist and prop maker at Leeds Playhouse. There he met his long-term partner, Ali Allen, a theatre set designer, and began to play in a duo with Phillips, a country blues expert who made a living repairing guitars.



Brendan Croker, far right, with the Notting Hillbillies on Saturday Night Live in 1990. That year their album was a No 2 hit in the UK. Photograph:

NBCUniversal/Getty Images

Phillips had played in a Leeds-based duo with Knopfler, the Duolian String Pickers, which came to an end in 1974 when Knopfler left the city. Brendan took Knopfler's place, and their fans in Leeds included the future DJ and broadcaster Andy Kershaw, then at Leeds University. Watching them at the Packhorse pub in 1978, he was impressed by their "outstanding" playing on Duolian metal-bodied guitars, and when Brendan also began playing with his electric band, the 5 O'Clock Shadows (named after Cliff Richards' Shadows, but playing country, blues and reggae), Kershaw decided that Brendan was "blossoming into an enormous talent, a world-class guitarist with a white soul voice like Frankie Miller .... the nearest thing we had to Ry Cooder".

When Kershaw moved to London in 1984 and became a presenter on The Old Grey Whistle Test, he made sure that the 5 O'Clock Shadows appeared on the programme, also helping them to get support slots with touring

American artists such as Los Lobos and Robert Cray. Brendan's Shadows released their first album, *A Close Shave* (1986), on the Leeds indie label UnAmerican Activities, followed by *Boat Trips in the Bay* (1987) and *Brendan Croker & the 5 O'Clock Shadows* (1989), which included guest appearances from Clapton, Knopfler and Tanita Tikaram.

It was while he was establishing his reputation with the Shadows that the Notting Hillbillies came into being. According to Phillips, Knopfler had proposed the idea of doing something small-scale after Dire Straits' massive *Brothers in Arms* tour in 1985-86, and so the original Duolian String Pickers got together, now joined by Brendan, for some "little gigs that made the front page of the papers, with Kershaw plugging us on the radio".

Brendan and Steve then began recording together at Mark's home studio, with Mark soon joining in, and the trio expanded to include the Dire Straits keyboard player Guy Fletcher, the 5 O'Clock Shadows' bassist Marcus Cliffe, the American steel guitarist Paul Franklin and the Dire Straits manager, Ed Bicknell, on drums. Bicknell had not heard of Brendan until the Hillbillies started, but found him to be "an amazing singer – he'd have held his own with Springsteen or Tom Jones ... someone who had a great passion and put his heart into everything we did".

The Hillbillies' album was a No 2 hit in the UK and a success in Europe, Australia and New Zealand, with its release marked by a lengthy UK tour of halls and small venues.

The band followed up with a series of reunion shows, with their UK tours in 1998 and 1999 including dates at Ronnie Scott's in London.

Brendan had never been to the US until 1989, when Knopfler invited him to Nashville and introduced him to Atkins, with whom he got on famously. He played in Nashville both with Knopfler and Atkins, and can be seen on the [video for Poor Boy Blues](#) from their *Neck and Neck* album (1990), although he did not actually play on the record.

At one point it seemed that Brendan might be about to become a successful Nashville songwriter, especially when Wynonna Judd, a major country star, recorded his song [What It Takes](#) in 1992. But by then he had lost interest in the Nashville scene, preferring to return instead to Europe, where he played with a Belgian country rock band, The Serious Offenders, on a tour that included Belgian prisons.

Back in Leeds, Brendan put some of his Hillbillies earnings into Lion, a recording studio, and bought horses that faced an uncertain future when no longer wanted by a local riding school. He also continued to play solo and to collaborate with others. He toured and recorded with [Kevin Coyne](#) (2002), worked with Phillips and the Leeds band Eric Pope & the Cardinals, and continued to build up his following in continental Europe (especially

Belgium) by touring with the Belgian singer-songwriter Bruno Deneckere and the French guitarist Pierre Velghe.

Although he never became the international celebrity he might have been, Brendan played the music he loved, once telling me: “I can’t understand those angst-ridden pop stars. This is the best job in the world.”

He is survived by Ali.

Brendan Croker, musician, born 15 August 1953; died 10 September 2023