

# IN THE WILD WEST END...

*Steve Phillips and Brendan Croker*



THERE'S A WELL-KNOWN saying concerning little acorns and large oaks that applies perfectly to the Notting Hillbillies. The roots of this particular tree lie in The Grove pub in Leeds, in May 1986. In front of a packed house three old friends – Steve Phillips, Brendan Croker and Mark Knopfler – ran through some blues classics and had a few drinks. At the end of the evening, they split the £1-per-head ticket money three ways – just £22 each. It was the first time the three had played together, but it wasn't to be the last. A couple of years on, and with Dire Straits on ice, Phillips asked Knopfler to produce an album he was making with Croker. Knopfler drafted in Dire Straits' Guy Fletcher to help with production, and the four-way collaboration slowly blossomed into a full-term project. Taking their name from the location of Knopfler's home studio, The Notting Hillbillies were born. The record deal, album, promotional video and tour have followed, but Croker's keen to emphasise the informal nature of it all.

**Brendan:** "It's actually better thinking about it in small terms. You can see it like a picture. If we said 'oh come on, we've got to develop this into a career,' then it would end the element of the holidays about it

played with a pick and his fingers, in a reasonably straight style, a very Buddy Guy sort of thing..."

**Brendan:** "...But now he's got that very percussive style that comes from the way he uses his thumb" he says, demonstrating a few Knopfleresque twangs. "Because of that he sounds like no-one else."

Phillips and Knopfler were soon appearing as The Duolian String Pickers, named after the brand of Nationals which they played. How did the love affair with Nationals begin?

**Steve:** "The first time I saw one was in a picture of Bukka White I think. And I just thought 'what is that thing?' They're amazing because they're so alien looking... and the way that the light reflects off them in so many different ways too... fantastic things. I got my first one for twenty-five pounds, and since then I've bought a few others. I'm sure that every National ever built is still being played somewhere because they're virtually indestructible."

Do you still own that first one?

**W**e're completely 'Patrick Moores' about this – eyebrows raised and corners of the mouth

quid to get that one!"

Knopfler left Leeds in 1973 to move to London – that story has been well documented. Phillips spent his time gigging as a solo blues artist, but because of his belief that learning to play blues takes time – "you have to have lived a bit to play it well" he says – he declined the opportunity to turn professional. He spent a few years building acoustic guitars. As we talk, he and Croker are strumming on two acoustics he built, currently owned by Knopfler, who swears they are among the best he's ever played. Phillips takes up the story...

"I basically saw an advert for someone with 'woodworking experience' who was wanted to repair guitars. I just thought, 'Oh! That looks like fun!' and ended up giving it a go. Back then, there were no books on guitar repairing like you have now – there was one I remember on actually building guitars, but that's all – so I learnt things in a very haphazard way. I wasn't even told the 'correct' way to do certain things, and it was only later that I found out if I was doing things 'correctly', but some of the things I was supposedly doing wrong worked just as well, so it was very interesting. I was building flat-top