

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. Because we're completely 'Patrick Moore' about all this – eyebrow raised and completely crackers!" he laughs. "It's just been a lovely thing to do, especially now that people seem to like it."

Steve: "We've all spent a lot of time playing together so it's nice to finally get a record out of it."

And as part of a 'supergroup'?

Brendan: "Oh yes! Steve's super, Guy's super, Mark's super. Isn't that what a supergroup means?"

Phillips and Knopfler have known each other for years – in 1968, the young Knopfler was a junior reporter on the Yorkshire Evening Post and found himself interviewing Phillips, a local country blues revivalist. Phillips had digested a musical diet of Leadbelly, Blind Blake and Lonnie Johnson, and soon hit it off with Knopfler. At this point Knopfler was playing in a straight R&B band, but through meeting Phillips he began to absorb the influence of Lonnie Johnson.

Steve: "When I first met Mark he

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?

We're completely 'Patrick Moores' about this – eyebrows raised and completely crackers!

"I only have one these days, but Mark's got a couple. The four on the cover are basically all we've got!" he laughs. "I used to own one of the one's that Mark's got – the one on the 'Brothers In Arms' cover – but the one I've got is an even rarer beast called the National Don. Only about two or three of those ever turned up, and they were solid nickel silver ones, which is quite rare for the single resonator models. It was usually only Tri-plates which were nickel silver, so these were an aborted attempt I think, because there were so few made..."

Brendan: "I want to see Tampa Red's one, the gold guitar..."

Steve: "Yeah, there's two references to that – one by Big Bill Broonzy and another on a record calling him 'the man with the gold guitar'. At first I thought it was probably a printing error, but I think it was a style for a tri-plate, gold-plated. It must look absolutely amazing. He must have had a few

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 acoustics, but I gave it up after a while because there's just no money in it."

What do you think is the best guitar that you've ever played?

"Well, I'm not a great fan of jumbos, but the nicest jumbo I've ever played was a pre-war, very early Gibson Advanced Jumbo, which was absolutely beautiful..."

(According to Tom Wheeler's 'American Guitars', the Gibson Advanced Jumbo, with a large body width of 17 1/4 inches and a 25 1/2 inch scale, was manufactured between mid-1937 and 1939.)

"...It had carved X-bracing and the lot, basically an early version of the J45. The nicest Martin – although I'm biased and really like the 12 fret triple-0 18 that I've got – but the nicest 14 fret triple-0 I've played was an OM-28, that Roy Bookbinder used to own. That one disproved the theory that a guitar needs lots of playing to sound good, because this was a 1929 one I think, with a pyramid bridge and everything and it turned up at Mandolin Brothers Guitar Shop in New York, still in its