

# For a few dollars less

Knackered by the stadium circuit, and in urgent need of spiritual rejuvenation, Mark Knopfler played a pub gig back in '86 with two fellow finger-picking blues enthusiasts. Thus *The Notting Hillbillies* were born and, three years later, they're offering an album and low-key tour. "It's about getting back to normal," they tell Phil Sutcliffe. "Get the drinks in, carry your own guitar. . ."



The Notting Hillbillies—(from left) Steve Phillips, Mark Knopfler, Guy Fletcher, Brendan Croker—"a class social skewering" and an album of village ways to towns by artists such as Lonnie Johnson, The Delmore Brothers, Jesse Fuller and Chubby Rick.

May 31, 1986, and Saturday night wild music night down Back Row in Hunslet, Leeds. The Grove pub, an odd 18th-century survivor in the middle of an industrial estate, all hand-turned wood and yellowed paintwork, was sold right out—80 people crammed into the back room. At one end sat three bikes with three legs dangling from their lips, picking at three acoustic guitars. They concluded a delicately stomping piece called Hillsby Boogie and the crowd expressed their warm appreciation.

Then a lad leaning on top of the table football machine— they'd never seen him before, probably not from Yorkshire at all—bellowed a request: "Sulaise Of Swing!" The reply came with a grin from the thin, balding guitarist in the middle: it was as

traditional as the music, it ended with "off", and Mark Knopfler, Steve Phillips and Brendan Croker dropped like a stone into Mystery Train. Knopfler, one of the most famous people in the world at the time, was getting back to where he came from.

A month earlier Dire Straits had finished the

**The Notting Hillbillies' album got a more spontaneous welcome from record companies than any of Dire Straits' albums. But the rest of the band are fully aware that if they'd offered the same people such a whimsical notion without Mark Knopfler's involvement they'd "not have got past the second door. . ."**

two-year cycle of recording *Brothers In Arms* and touring the world—246 dates, three million punters—which propelled them into the rock aristocracy. Then, at once, Knopfler had fulfilled a commitment by going straight into the studio with Tina Turner to produce two tracks for her *Break Every Rule* album. By the time his old mate Phillips popped in to see him at his Notting Hill home, he was run ragged.

"He said, I really fancy coming up and doing a couple of gigs with you in Leeds," says Phillips. "I thought, Is he serious? But I said, Right, tell you what, I've got a couple this weekend, one with Brendan and one on me own—come up. And he did! We didn't tell anybody about it because it would have been mental. But when we were setting up, Ian, the landlord at The Grove, poked his head