

round the door and said, 'Oh, you've got someone else playing with you?' I said, 'Yeah, a mate. But you could see the penny dropping. I think he must have phoned a few people because when we went on I'd never seen so many cameras in my life.'

Croker, who'd likewise known Knopfler when, as they say, he had nose, reckons he couldn't have picked a better place to get back to the roots. 'The Grove's a real musicians' pub. It's probably the only bar in the world where you can buy a packet of snags or a bottle neck as well as a pint,' he says. 'What I thought was, how intelligent! Let's try and get back to normal. Carry your own guitar, get the drinks in, have a play. We did about three hours. Guinness, it was. Lager, beer bitter, Guinness, not many Bacardi and Cokes.'

At the end of the night they split the £1-a-head take three ways, £22 each. It was the first time they'd all played together in public and none of them thought it was the start of anything at all. But slowly, almost accidentally, the trio grew into The Notting Hillbillies: the multi-national record deal, the promotional video, the album, the tour. A night out has become a 'project' — but the protagonists still mean to live up to their LP title. *Missing ... Presumed Having A Good Time*.

Knopfler and Phillips go back a long way. They met in 1968 when a Yorkshire Evening Post arts reporter called Stephen Phillips thought it would be a good wheeze to interview his namesake, the local country blues revivalist, and talk along his junior, young Mark, lately graduated from the journalism course at Harlow Tech. Like two transients on a deserted platform, they soon fell into the sort of arcane dialogue which leaves outsiders wide-eyed and logging it. Guitars, guitar-man, favourite songs. Inevitably, one of them said, 'Fancy a bit of a play then?', and that's been their watershed ever since. Serious social strumming commenced.

'Steve had a solid record collection and the ability to work out pretty much exactly what these people were doing,' says Knopfler. 'I would come in on the end of that process and pick up on the spirit of it. We went from Blind Willie McTell to Leadbelly through Blind Blake and ragtime then western swing. Steve had already done his jug band bit and would both done rockabilly and bottleneck. It was a kind of university course without releasing it. My approach was taking a little bit from here, there and everywhere, putting the jigsaw together, you never finish it but you get to the stage where you are conversant with a number of genres, you have a certain amount of vocabulary at your disposal.'

It seems that, true and obsessive enthusiasts as they were and are, there was also a shade of the academic about their dedication — a conscious aestheticism, an analytical attention to structure, cause and effect, which went a long way beyond the quintessential cliché, 'Man, the blues is a feeling'. It probably came from their family backgrounds.

Phillips's father was a sculptor (In The Gallery, from Dave Straits' first album, is about him), his mother is a painter, and, even in the '50s, he was growing up to a soundtrack of blues 78s. Of course, Rickie Luxembourg made him want to be Elvis, but when, at about 14, he heard a classic collection of pre-war blues great Robert Johnson's recordings — it was reggae Londoners like Clapton and The Rolling Stones at the same time — he began a long self-imposed apprenticeship in roots music.

Knopfler's father was an architect and his mother played piano but, apart from rock 'n' roll on the radio, it's reckoned to have been his Uncle Kingale's pounding boogie-woogie assaults on the kitchen



A performance by the Duzlans String Pickers before the good job of the Hornsworth Memorial Institute, in recorded in a 1973 edition of the Yorkshire Evening Post. Knopfler is far left, sporting his 'Blind Willie McTell cap' which Steve Phillips (centre) thought made him 'look like a ape!'

that inspired him to look beyond Top 20 pop so that, by the time he met Phillips, he was already well versed in folk and blues.

As soon as he got to Leeds, Knopfler, then 18, had formed a short-lived R&B band modelled — like Cream — on Buddy Guy. Phillips, 20, had just completed a two-year detour into barnhouse piano and started gigging as a solo country bluesman, while taking a proper job as a furniture and picture restorer at a museum in the city. Fortunately, their wives (Knopfler's first marriage dissolved in 1974) got on, no doubt in part protecting one another from the music deluge, so they made up a convenient louncheon. 'It was long nights in poky flats with piles and piles and piles of playing,' says Knopfler.

Phillips introduced him not only to the technical nuances of finger-picking, then metal finger and thumb picks, but also to the majestic lead style of black blues guitarist Lonnie Johnson. 'I'm certain that altered the way Mark played,' he says. 'I can still hear it in him now.' The vintage National steel guitar was another discovery for Knopfler. At the time, Phillips had three — though they each cost up to £100, two months wages then — and he soon acquired another for Mark (a National steel was eventually featured on the cover of *Brothers In Arms*, of course).

Before long the duo were trodding the boards as The Duzlans String Pickers, named after a National guitar brand and sporting the gangster era threads favoured by their heroes on many a copes-trilled album sleeve. 'We even had the Blind Willie McTell caps,' recalls Knopfler, fondly. 'Quite difficult to find. A big cap with a tuffin in the middle.' Phillips reckons that, with a swatch of long hair protruding at either side, the thing made his friend look like a spaz.

They played clubs, pubs and private parties where, this being the happy era, as likely as not their set would be disrupted by one of those free-form 'let' events known as happenings, which generally involved the performers in taking their clothes off and 'expressing themselves' — while the Duzlans bent to the frets and strummed resolutely on.

And so they went on for five years. Within its own parameters it must have been a sort of self-

educatory paradise. But Knopfler was not content. Even within the Duzlans, he refused to perform his own songs. 'He'd ask me to sing them,' says Phillips, 'and I'd say, I can't really, they're yours, they're you, you've got to do it. But he never would.'

Knopfler left journalism to study English Literature at Leeds University for three years. His marriage was struggling. As soon as he graduated, in 1973, he decided to go to London and 'form a band.' But he hardly seemed overconfident and, though he had some staunch friends in Leeds, none of them claims to have spotted in him hidden reserves of charisma which would one day take him to the top.

The thing was I still thought I had a lot to learn,' says Phillips. 'I had great problems teaching myself country blues you see. I had to waste lots of years just trying to get basic knowledge together. That's why I didn't want to turn

