



professional then." He switched tracks to guitar repairing and took to rockabilly with a new line-up. The Steve Phillips Juke Band. That, in '76, Brendan Croker showed up.

Born in Bradford, Croker had studied sculpture at art school, but worked as a dustman and a British Rail guard until he fell into a job as stage designer at Leeds Playhouse. He hit it off with Phillips straight away, and, when the Juke Band folded, it was a simple matter of "Do you fancy a play?" They hit the circuit as New & Noms, "just to be honest," and for four years they were the local country blues scene, often promoting their own gigs and running a club at a pub called The Pack Horse.

Knopfler always stayed in touch and on cultural exchange visits north and south the three were always getting together to drum, sing and jaw. But, in 1980, Phillips finally — temporarily, as it turned out — lost patience with flogging the same horse of country blues round the local circuit, competing against the vibrant energies of punk, new wave, then the New Romantic invasion, and betook him to an artist's studio to paint landscapes. For six years he even made a living at it, filling an alternative ambition long suppressed by his musical preoccupations.

However, contrary, in the wrong time and the wrong place, Croker did take the plunge into writing a living from music — insofar as anyone would have him, and with the occasional burst of painting and decorating on the side when things looked bleak. With his band, the 5 O'Clock Shadows, he actually got an album out on Leeds independent label American Activities and, early in '86, he told Phillips that the scene had stilled at least and should he fancy a play.

Phillips was ready — after a 25-year apprenticeship. "We're all late developers," he says. "Brendan and me hardly started writing songs till we were in our thirties. Mark was what, 27, when Dire Straits finally got under way. Richards? At last, he turned pro and began to make a solid living solo, gigging all over the country, quickly establishing himself as a handy support for such as The Blues Band, Stacey Span and Nanci Griffith, and in due course releasing a couple of Unamerican Activities albums of his own.

Meanwhile, of course, "our mate Knopfler" had got his teacher training certificate, done a couple of years in a Further Education college, formed Dire Straits and swiftly become a superstar and peer, pal and producer to legends like Bob Dylan, Tina Turner and Eric Clapton.

"I suppose it is a bit weird, that happening to a friend," says Phillips. "It's because they're the same person you've known all through the years so you don't hold them in the awe that other people do who've only met them as stars. The Hibbles thing started a couple of years ago with him saying to me he'd like to produce my second album."

"The moment we started it became a united effort, though," says Knopfler. "Steve immediately decided it would be better as a Steve and Brendan record, but Guy Fletcher from DS was in there as well to deal with the Syncrude and co-produce it with me. Soon we were all staking ideas in, especially about these wonderful tunes we wanted people to hear."

They worked on it irregularly from early '88 at Knopfler's home studio, weaving their schedules between other matters of artistic interest — Dire Straits' build-up to topping the bill at the Nelson Mandela "birthday party", Knopfler and Fletcher's work on Randy Newman's album and the Last Exit To Brooklyn soundtrack — and, for Phillips and

Croker, the fiscal urgency of earning a crust by gigging (and, in Brendan's case, through a now major-league record deal for The 5 O'Clock Shadows with Silverstone). One day Knopfler asked where Brendan was, a roadie said "Missing, presumed having a good time", and they had their album title.

Then, last summer, in a Notting Hill wine bar, Steve's manager Ed Bisknell looked on while the music mob mulled conspiratorially at another table. When they seemed to have reached a conclusion, he drifted over and Knopfler announced, "We've decided to put a band together

**Mark Knopfler: "You forget how much your songs mean to people. How much they use them — to drive taxis with, to have their babies with, to paint pictures with, to live with. If they think Dire Straits aren't going out again, they got pretty upset..."**

to tour with the record." Below Bisknell's eyebrows could return from his hairline, he added, "And you're the drummer!"

This was a whole new dimension to the musical mix. Bisknell was already featured on the album in the sense that he'd whacked the kit for Fletcher to sample and sequence. But a manager in the band? Well, he insists he's got credentials going back decades (he's 41) — from studies with the Buddy Rich drum tutor, through lessons with Alec Sistirotom of his teenage patois de dance in Tadcaster, to a host of dautious combos including Megal Thrash, with John Wetton on bass (King Crimson, Roxy Music) and Molly Duncan and Roger Ball on horns (Average White Band).

The high-water mark, though, was probably the months he spent with Wetton backing never-was teen idol Jess Conrad. "We did the rounds, Ballie Varsity Club and the Seclusion Fests," he says. "John used to stand behind the curtain to sing the high notes for him because he couldn't reach them and in Oh You Beautiful Doll he had a tapdance which he couldn't manage either so I'd beat it out on the rim of the snare drum. I'm no purist, I'm happy whether it's a forrit or Take Five. If one of the Hibbles says, Right, the hokey-cokey!, that'll be fine by me."

Though they have yet to see him in action, the Leeds contingent are quietly confident about his abilities. "I knew Ed was a drummer from having met with him," says Croker. "Gave him a knife and fork and he goes into a military tattoo. A Chinese meal, chopsticks, he's in heaven! No, he wouldn't

have been asked if it wasn't possible. It's all seemed quite natural. Once we got under way it was like pouring water out of a jug."

One of the less obvious aspects of the Hibbles album is the way it brings together old songs (not to mention vintage guitars, and others hand-made by Phillips which Knopfler calls the best he's ever played) and state-of-the-art technology.

Brendan Croker, lover of "cheap poetry", is the unsearchable archivist of their set list. "Bewildered is a Lonnie Johnson song, a lovely thing, a real forerunner of modern pop. Blues Stay Away From Me, that's by the Delmore Brothers and without them you wouldn't have had the Everlys, in my opinion, because their dad, Ike Everly, was well in with the Delmores. Railroad Working I always liked because of Jesse Fuller who was a wonderful, lumbering, spirited sort of man. This old hammer rings like silver, shines like gold." When you work with tools they loom large. Fowl Like Going Home, that's Charlie Rich and he's normally very produced, very Billy Sherrill, big Nashville. But me and Steve and Mark heard it a few years ago on a outtake where he seems to be singing it just to explain it to the band. Ripped you apart, it's been part of my life ever since, it's never left.

That may be the heart of the matter, but what Knopfler the roots met a quarter of a million quid's worth of Syncrude and, in Guy Fletcher, an inventive hand on the production stick. He had simply never heard of any of these songs. At 28, alumnus of archetypal '70s bands Roxy Music and Codeine Rebel before he joined Steaks in '85, he had nothing against country blues but, pre-Hibbles, it had passed him by. "I'm always moaning to listen to records," he says. "Mark's always telling me I should. But I don't, it's a failing of mine. Still, what's exciting to me is to hear these songs recorded in their original styles with this completely fresh sound from the new technology."

Croker, curator of tradition that he is, was quite sanguine about the Syncrude's ability to sample and reanimate the elements of a song electronically. "If Guy's not prejudiced about us wanting to use very old guitars, equally we can't be prejudiced about his skills," he says. "I thought that was good, bringing different chunks of the world together and, by dint of mutual cooperation, making it work."

To Ed Bisknell's considerable surprise, the outcome got a more spontaneous welcome from record companies than any of the Straits' albums, especially in America. On the other hand, the Hibbles are fully aware that if they'd taken such a whimsical notion to the same executives without the

The Notting Hillbillies — Fletcher, Knopfler, Phillips, Croker — a one-off publicity shot became "project", snowballing into a multi-national record deal with promotional videos, album and tour. Undaunted, the quartet freely intend to live up to their LP title, Missing... Presumed Having a Good Time.

