

Knopfler endorsement, as Coker puts it, "we'd not have got past the second disc".

But now, come April, they'll be "in your town tonight — you know, like Hank Williams", 40 shows in 42 days, with three string pickers, Fletcher and Bicknell, augmented by Nashville ace Paul Franklin on pedal steel and 5. O'Clock Shadow Marcus Cilla on bass. It isn't quite the carnal adventure of their initial fantasies, but close enough.

"At first we were talking about just playing pubs and clubs," says Knopfler, "but when Ed started to look at the logistics and costs it expanded a bit. We'll average about 1,300 people a night, I think. I wouldn't want it to get any bigger."

Hillbilly style will be spartan compared to Dire Straits, rather comfy compared to what Phillips and Coker are used to. "We'll travel in a minibus, with one truck for the gear," says Bicknell. "No tour catering — as Mark said, there's an Indian restaurant open in most towns, isn't there? But there'll be 17 of us and it's virtually impossible to get rooms at less than 50 quid a night for a group that large. These are the realities you have to deal with. There's the cost of five weeker rehearsals to cover too and I had to give serious consideration to the fact that most of the people on this tour need to earn a living, even if Mark and me can afford to be blasé about that sometimes."

At the end of the tour it'll be back to the spirit of the Grove — divide the profits equally between the band members. But for the moment, of course, these profits are strictly hypothetical.

While the enterprise certainly offers a place of honour to nostalgia, Knopfler is no hair-shirt fanatic when it comes to the grubbiest hands-on aspects of pub rock days. "Nah, I don't have fond memories of humping me own gear," he says. "It was bloody difficult hauling beer bins up and down chutes into the cellar at the Hope & Anchor. I'm not that bothered about changing me own strings either. You're always puncturing your hands."

For him the point, as he's telling everyone he passes the time of day with casually, is that he's "back in love with music" and, in the company of the Hillbillies, free to express it with people who speak his language. "There's a shorthand between us," he says. "If you came into a rehearsal you'd wonder what the hell we were talking about, it's mostly grunts and spits and sniffs and the odd phrase like 'head of the pro- up' or 'downbeat'. It's just developed over years of working together."

The Hillbillies anticipate a short, happy life. In May it will all be over (though not necessarily for ever). Phillips will return to his round of solo gigs, Coker and Cilla to the "Sheds" (whose other guitarist, Mark Crosswell, is touring with Tarra Takanen), Bicknell to the office — and Fletcher and Knopfler to Dire Straits.

Until quite recently, Guy Fletcher really did believe that Brothers In Arms would comprise his complete career with Dire Straits. Knopfler, obviously the sine qua non of the band, was engrossed in a long exploratory swing through record production and writing movie soundtracks which soon looked as though it had become a new life rather than a digression. But, in part via the Hillbillies, he came full circle.

"I'd like to say I'm never going to do another film score, I'm never going to produce another artist again," he says. "I do enjoy it but it's too time-consuming dreaming other people's dreams. It takes away from what you do best. I'm best... no, it's my most allusive, when I'm dealing with my own songs and my own band. I feel most comfort-



"Piles and piles and piles of playing" with manager (former Calliswell) (centre, right). "None of the people on this tour need to earn a living, even if Mark and me can afford to be blasé about that sometimes."

able at the centre of that, going through some songs and getting them sorted out. So I've got to spend less time being enforced."

Before he fulfils this promise to himself he has to complete one further labour of love, an album of guitar duets he's recording with Chet Atkins, dean of the Nashville pickers, and work up the Knobworth Muse: Therapy (with all-star band (including Clapton, Elton John and Straits' bassist John Illsey). Then, in September, Dire Straits will record and begin the long haul towards an album and world tour of the requisite wide-screen dimensions.

"Something I've been realising is that you can

forget how much your songs mean to people," he says. "How much they use them — to drive taxis with, to have their babies with, to paint pictures with, you know, live with. People write and tell you these things, or you bump into them in the pub and it comes out. If they think we're not going out again they get pretty upset. But it's not just what it is to them, it's what it is to me, that's the issue."

As he once remarked in a rare moment of idiomatic vehemence: "Art without responsibility, bullshit!"

For more on Hillbillies, see CONCERTS, page 103.