



Croker and fellow fingerpicker Steve Phillips performing as *Steve and Nev* in the late '70s. Influences ranged from Elvis Presley to The Ronettes, Chris Hillman, Arthur Lee, Woody Guthrie and Willie McTell.



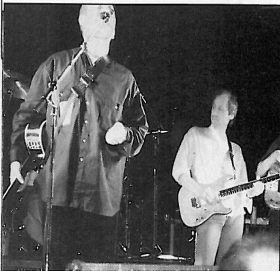
and as yet unfocused ambition like Mark Knopfler and Andy Kershaw. Then there was Steve Phillips, Knopfler's partner in The Duolian String Pickers earlier in the '70s. They quickly formed a friendship on the common ground of unusual candour. "Steve said, 'Play us a tune. That was all right, you know, me hands functioned,'" says Croker. "Then he said, 'Sing us a song. So I did. He said, 'You don't mean it. And I thought, 'Ah, yes, that was the other thing. I was 23, been playing for years but that was one gem of information I'd missed, because nobody was honest enough to tell me.'"

Phillips advised him to go back and listen to the people he loved — from Elvis, The Ronettes, Chris Hillman and Arthur Lee to Woody Guthrie, Willie McTell, Jesse Fuller and Sleepy John Estes. "I went through all my songs and I didn't mean any of them, though I got them all beautifully right. It took a long time to change. Now I do things spectacularly wrong, but I do mean them. Just for the two minutes of delivery it's. This is me. After that you're off home or you may get drunk and arrested, but it doesn't matter."

Croker and Phillips became a duo called *Nev & Norris* and piled the Northern clubs for several years. Meanwhile, Croker's theatre job was wearing thin. "I became unemployable," he says. "The trouble was I couldn't oh-darling-you-were-wonderful." Plugging the gaps in his bank account with a bit of freelance painting and decorating, he decided that music was what he would do with his life.

"What I like is cheap poetry," he says. "Waterloo Sunset. It's quick, it's nice, it's moving, and everyone knows what you're on about. You don't need a wine and cheese party to launch it. That Lennon and McCartney thing, *For No One*. 'The day breaks/Your mind aches.' That'll do. *Lovely*. And I'm sure nobody pored over it. *Big Bill Broonzy*. 'If you're white, it's all right/If you're brown, stick around/If you're black, oh brother, get back.' Now that's excellent, that's cheap poetry. I could never do anything as poig-

With Mark Knopfler at Leeds Polytechnic, June 11 '89: "Good friends have led me by the hand. Doors have opened because of my mate Knopfler, I know."



nant as that, I'm just not in that league, pal. Well, the stuff I wrote at first was shite, daft ramblings. I wouldn't inflict it on the cat. That's why I mostly did other people's songs before this LP."

Into the '80s he switched to an electric band with fellow Tykes Mark Cresswell on guitar from the outset and Marcus Cliffe on bass for the last three years (there's been no long-term drummer). Like all their heroes before them, they hardroded the highway. "We were a good band for slog," he says. "Easily 200 gigs in a year. Blue-arsed flies. Carlisle to London and back to Leeds. Useless organisation because it was me setting it up. A tenner apiece and you were doing all right." They kept the faith. Reworkings of Tampa Red and Skip James, Carole King and William Bell, anonymous traditional folk and hymns.

And at some point in 1987, when they were recording their second indie-label album, *Boat Trips In The Bay* on Red Rhino (budget £1,200), he started coming up with songs which, he felt, wouldn't be an embarrassment. "It happened through not being at home much," he says. "You end up, as they say, 'mekkin' your own entertainment. I've written things on buses, in shops. That's Why I'm Leaving Here, which I sang with Tanita on this LP, arrived in my head lock, stock and barrel while I was in bed watching Clive James. The single, *No Money At All*, came out of a conversation over a bottle of vodka about Hank Marvin and the state of

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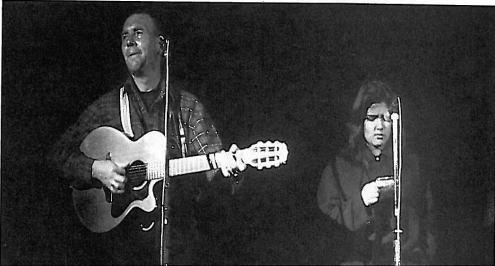
the welfare system. The two got sort of joined together." (Knopfler's guitar deals with the Hank Marvin question, the words cover the politics.)

It was the writing that set him off — in his mid-thirties — quite straightforwardly trying to break into the big time. "When you start to make up tunes, you'd like people to hear them," he says. "I know it's a perversion, but you've gone to all that bother. . . ." His parents, perhaps, went to even more bother, tightening their belts to lend him the £3,500 he needed to pay debts, record demos, put the band about in London and find the businessmen who might make something of their charisma-free yet sterling qualities.

When his old mates, Kershaw and Knopfler, saw he really meant it at last, they got right behind him. "Good friends have actively shielded me and led me by the hand. They've said, 'You should meet so-and-so because he'll never lie to you. Doors opened because of my mate Knopfler, I know. I never said anything myself, but word got around, you could tell.'"

Agent and manager were secured and a record

Tanita Tikaram in impromptu jam at London's Mean Fiddler, late '87: "I love the band. It's incredible how they take all their influences and come up with a joyous, original sound."



With The 5 O'Clock Shadows — Mark Cresswell (left), guitar and bassist Marcus Cliffe: "We were a good band for slog. Easily 200 gigs a year. Blue-arsed flies."

deal was signed with Silvertone's Andrew Lauder, a man whose history of promoting classic blues and country on Demon assured The 5 O'Clock Shadows of the special empathy their music needed — and a realistic, though not extravagant, £80,000 budget for their third album. The studio was where they realised they'd never actually been alone in that long straight furrow they'd ploughed. "When we couldn't even get arrested lots of people would say to us, 'If you make a record give us a ring. So we did. They all came down and played, but none of them would tek owt. In the end we gave them all mpuntain bikes made by this local firm, Bob Jackson.'"

The Clapton connection arose from Knopfler playing in his tour band last year. Croker and Steve Phillips formed an impromptu acoustic trio with him at a party and later he dropped in at Matrix studio where the 5 O'Clock Shadows album was being recorded. "We had a song, *This Kind Of Life*, that needed a second voice. After we'd chatted a bit I said, 'You don't fancy a sing do you? It took him half an hour. He sang it as if he'd known it all his life. 'Will you sign the MU form?', 'Fuck off!', and that was it. So it dawned on me. These people like singing. They like playing. A lot of them are highly normal. Dead normal. I can testify to it.'"

Brendan Croker is rather normal too. But he's no threat, no young gunslinger, no centre-fold that's for sure. The 5 O'Clock Shadows will not oust anyone from anywhere. Somehow they lay anxiety to rest and accentuate the positive in everyone they meet.

It's not the worst job Croker ever had. "You work more hours than any other bugger, writing the songs and recording them. On the other hand, it's all magic and it's all yours! There's an old Hindu proverb, 'The smile you give out is the money you get back. Maybe it works.'"