

Mark Knopfler's Musical Journey

By David McKittrick

Mark Knopfler's long, prolific career as a guitarist, singer, and songwriter began with Dire Straits' formation in London in 1977 and their eponymous debut album in 1978. It continues today with a new solo album, *One Deep River*, due April 12, 2024. In the intervening years, he recorded six studio albums with Dire Straits, nine solo albums, two solo EPs, nine soundtracks, two collaboration albums, and a few live albums. He also recorded with numerous artists and produced four albums for others, including Bob Dylan and Randy Newman. Knopfler is a brilliant and unique guitarist, ranked #27 in *Rolling Stone* magazine's Top 100 Greatest Guitarists of All Time. Dire Straits was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame in 2018. Knopfler is on the shortlist of guitarists whose sound and style is so distinct and original that they can often be identified after just a few notes or phrases. But Knopfler is much more than a guitar hero—he's a teller of tales, a creator of characters, an interpreter of historical events, and a painter of sonic landscapes.

Dire Straits original lineup—Mark Knopfler (guitar/vocals), brother David Knopfler (rhythm guitar), John Illsley (bass), and Pick Withers (drums)—released two albums, *Dire Straits* (1978) and *Communique* (1979). They found instant success with their single, "Sultans of Swing," reaching the Top 10 in the US and UK. Both albums focused on Knopfler's blistering guitar work and introduced audiences to his distinctive, fingerstyle guitar technique and smooth, baritone voice. Each album sold well and produced one hit single, but Knopfler's songwriting was a work in process and the songs overall lacked the depth and breadth of his later work.

At Bob Dylan's request, Knopfler joined the lineup for the *Slow Train Coming* (1979) album and Knopfler subsequently recorded with artists including Mavis Staples, Steely Dan, Van Morrison, Buddy Guy, and Eric Clapton. During sessions for Dire Straits' third album, *Making Movies* (1980), David Knopfler quit over creative differences and keyboards were added as a prominent part of the band's sonic palette with Roy Bittan (Springsteen's E-Street Band) joining the sessions. The album's best track, "Romeo and Juliet," is a tale of failed love that showed Knopfler's expanding range as a writer and arranger. The song opens gently and builds through each verse only to release into a soft passage and build again before transitioning to a unique outro theme. The song is a staple of Knopfler's live shows with the short outro from the album extended into long, soaring solo passages. *Love Over Gold* (1982) followed and opened with the 14-minute epic "Telegraph Road," illustrating Knopfler's willingness to take musical risks. Alan Clark (keyboards) joined the band for that album and remained until the final breakup. "Private Dancer" was recorded for the album, but not released and later given to Tina Turner—for whom it was a Top 10 hit. 1983's four-song EP, *ExtendedancEPlay* included "Twisting by the Pool"—a rock 'n' roll romp presaging the future hit "Walk of Life." During this period, Knopfler wrote and recorded music for the movie *Local Hero* and he later provided music for eight additional films.

For *Brothers in Arms* (1985), the band added Guy Fletcher (keyboards). Fletcher has been a trusted partner for Knopfler since, playing on each solo album while also acting as recording engineer. This was the band's best-selling album with three smash hits—"Money for Nothing," "Walk of Life," and "So Far Away." Knopfler used several session musicians on the album, playing trumpet, saxophone, and vibes. The stress of touring and the hype around the band proved overwhelming for Knopfler, resulting in the band's first breakup in 1988.

Knopfler formed The Notting Hillbillies in 1989 with Guy Fletcher and pedal steel guitar ace Paul Franklin. Their only album is a low-key, country-tinged affair that includes the smokey classic "Your Own Sweet Way" and the hard swinging "Run Me Down." Knopfler continued leaning into country with *Neck and Neck* (1990), a collaboration with Nashville icon Chet Atkins, while also recording two more movie soundtracks and briefly joining Eric Clapton's touring band.

In 1991, Dire Straits reformed to record *On Every Street*, their final album. The album's stylistic range and sophistication is remarkable with rock, country, folk, blues, jazz, and pop influences. By this time, Knopfler had a fully developed "voice" on guitar that, along with his smooth vocals, binds the album together across varied musical styles and instrumentation. Hits included rockers "Calling Elvis," "Heavy Fuel," and "The Bug" (also a hit single for Mary Chapin Carpenter) and there were no weak tracks on the album. "On Every Street," "Fade to Black," and the

jazz-tinged “Planet of New Orleans” are dark and brooding, while Knopfler contrasts up-tempo pop music with environmental commentary on “My Parties.” “Ticket to Heaven” offers a stinging critique of televangelists combined with lilting strings and a cheery feel. Dire Straits toured over the next few years before disbanding for good in 1995. Knopfler released his first solo album, *Golden Heart*, in 1996, incorporating traditional instruments such as tin whistle, Irish harp, and uilleann pipes—“Done with Bonaparte” is a great example. *Sailing to Philadelphia* (2000) included duets with James Taylor (title track) and Van Morrison, while *The Ragpicker’s Dream* (2002) marked a return to more traditional rock instrumentation and a core lineup of Guy Fletcher (keyboards), Paul Franklin (pedal steel), Richard Bennett (guitar), Glenn Worf (bass), and Jim Cox (keyboards). After a serious motorcycle crash in 2003 and subsequent rehabilitation, Knopfler returned to the studio to record *Shangri-La* (2004), a great collection performed by a tight group of seven musicians. He followed that in 2005 with two EPs, *The Trawlerman’s Song* and *One Take Radio Sessions*, with mostly live, in-studio recordings of previously released songs.

A 1998 session with Emmylou Harris adding vocals to two of Knopfler’s songs prompted conversations about a collaboration album—the blend of Knopfler’s smooth baritone vocals and Harris’ plaintive soprano was a revelation. Additional sessions led to *All the Roadrunning* (2006). Neil McCormick, reviewing for *The Telegraph*, called it “one of the best albums of both their careers.” A stellar live album and DVD, *Real Live Roadrunning* (2006), followed.

Knopfler has continued to release new solo material with albums *Kill to Get Crimson* (2007), *Get Lucky* (2009), *Privateering* (2012), *Tracker* (2015), and *Down the Road Wherever* (2018)—and a new album this month. The journey continues.