



# DIRE STRAITS

VIRTUOSO MUSICIANSHIP AND FINELY DEVELOPED SONGCRAFT MADE THIS BRITISH BAND ONE OF THE MOST SUCCESSFUL GROUPS OF THE EIGHTIES.

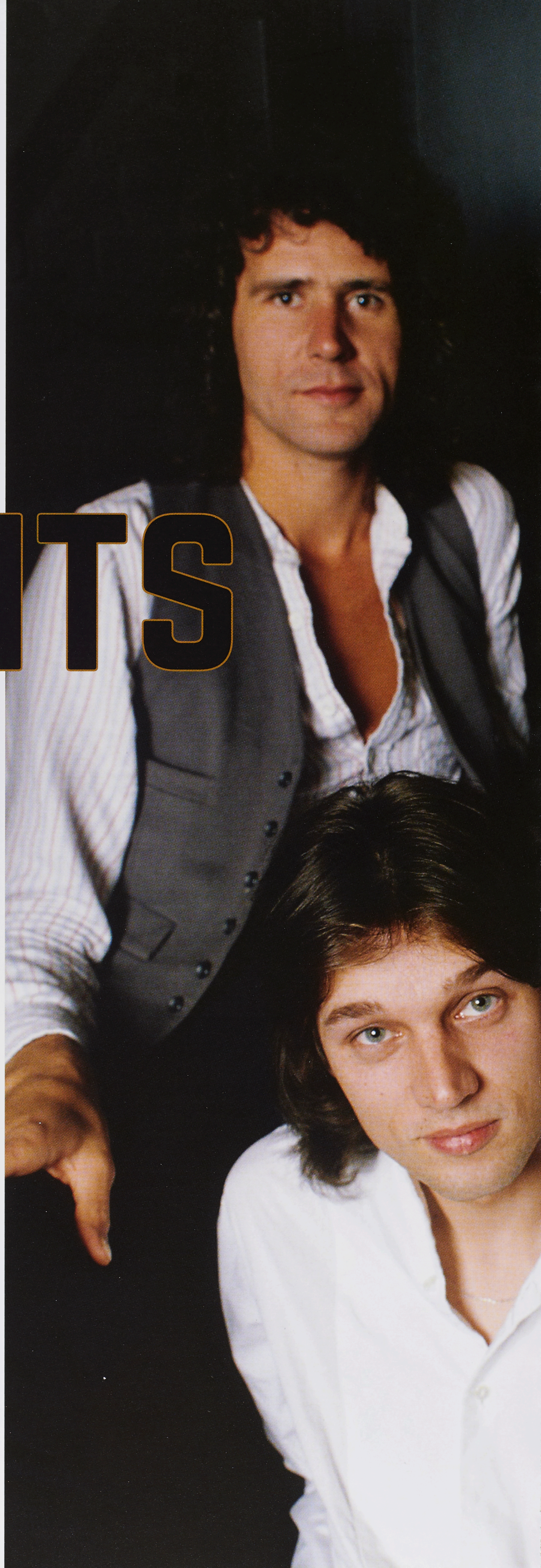
BY LENNY KAYE



**T**hese mist covered mountains/Are a home now for me/But my home is the lowlands/And always will be": The opening lines of Dire Straits' "Brothers in Arms" aptly describe the career arc of a band who never lost touch with the inspiration and well-spring of creativity with which it began, even as it ascended the heights of worldwide prominence under the leadership of virtuoso guitarist and songwriter Mark Knopfler.

Their common touch was evident in their first hit single from 1978, "Sultans of Swing," which affectionately describes a group of musicians who play for the love of the sound they ensemble rather than fame or fortune. With Knopfler's stinging, uniquely melodic, and clean-edged guitar, Dire Straits stood in direct counterpoint to the angry primitivism of rock enveloping London at the time. They would continue refining their aspirations until their landmark *Brothers in Arms* in 1985.

Whether capturing the MTV cultural moment with "Money for Nothing," a satirical yet open-hearted look at how the public perceives rock stardom, or, in the title track, sympathetically illuminating the hard-won battlefield camaraderie of quarreling nations that scars our times, Dire Straits — and later, Knopfler's solo career — presented a music that never shied from the complexities of human relationships, or the soaring guitar solos that



Dire Straits —  
the original four:  
John Illsley,  
Pick Withers,  
Mark Knopfler, and  
David Knopfler  
(clockwise from top  
left), in Amsterdam,  
Netherlands, 1978

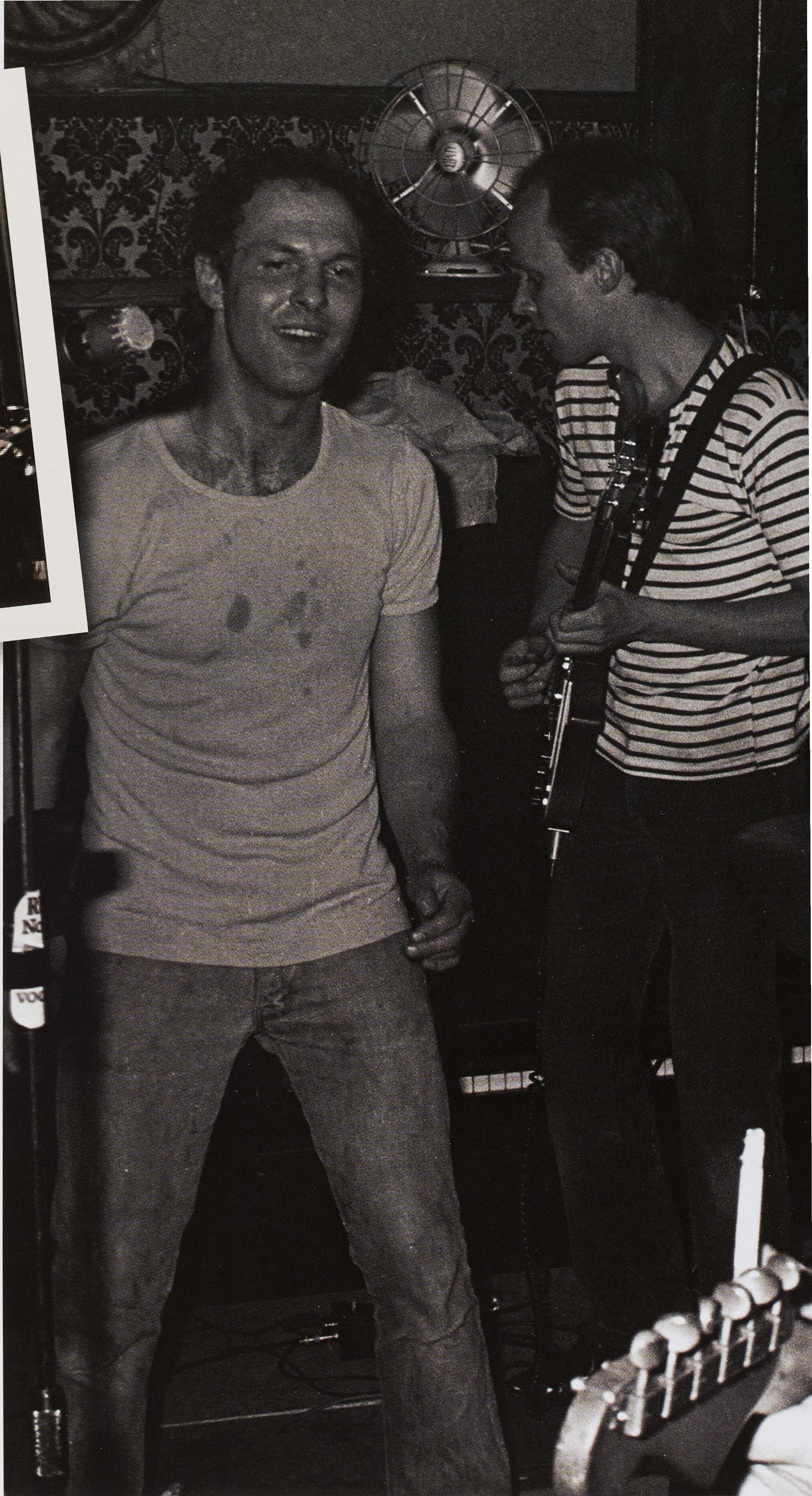




give us the will to rise above such divisive conflicts.

Lyrically perceptive and emotionally charged, the band set a standard of excellence and achievement that continued through six studio albums — each resolutely furthering the band's reach and conception. In a decade where flash and pyrotechnics seemed a career opportunity, their mode was considered, reflective, observational. Mark Knopfler had once been an aspiring journalist for the *Yorkshire Evening Post*, and could not only see the characters and narrative settings of his songs from an outside perspective, but also adjudge his own creative motives, unwilling to settle for anything less than forward motion. There is no wasted space in Dire Straits' discography; nor are there any missed opportunities.

Born in Glasgow, Scotland, in 1949, Knopfler grew up in Newcastle-on-Tyne, then kept traveling south until he reached the south London suburb of Deptford, where Dire Straits took shape in 1977. He developed an idiosyncratic fingerpicking technique on the electric guitar, moving through such acoustic mentors as Blind Willie McTell, Lead Belly, and Lonnie Johnson, flavoring them with the precision licks of James Burton and Scotty Moore. In particular, he found in B. B. King's *Live at the Regal* a way in which an economy

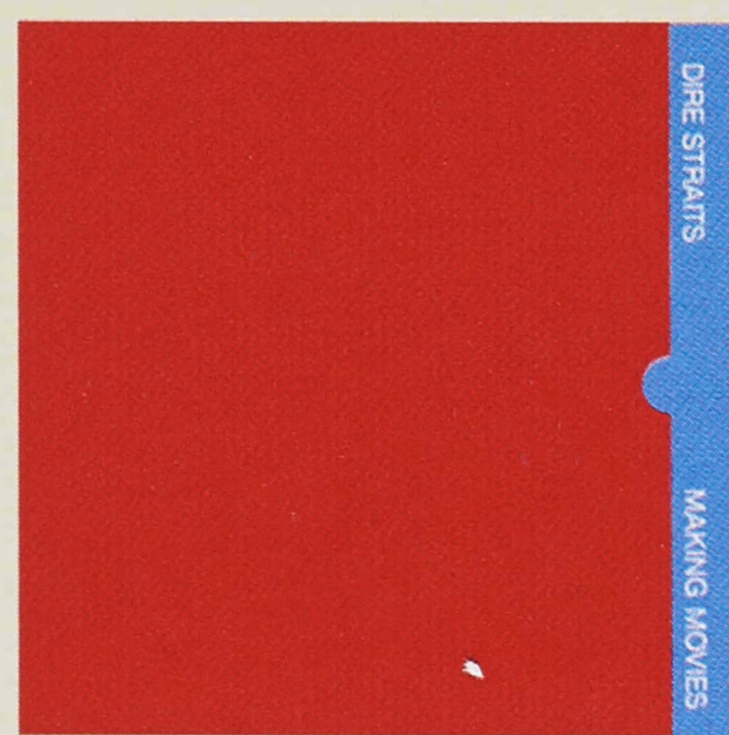


## SELECTED DISCOGRAPHY



### **Dire Straits**

1978 (Vertigo/Warner Bros.)



### **Making Movies**

1980 (Vertigo/Warner Bros.)



### **Love Over Gold**

1982 (Vertigo/Warner Bros.)



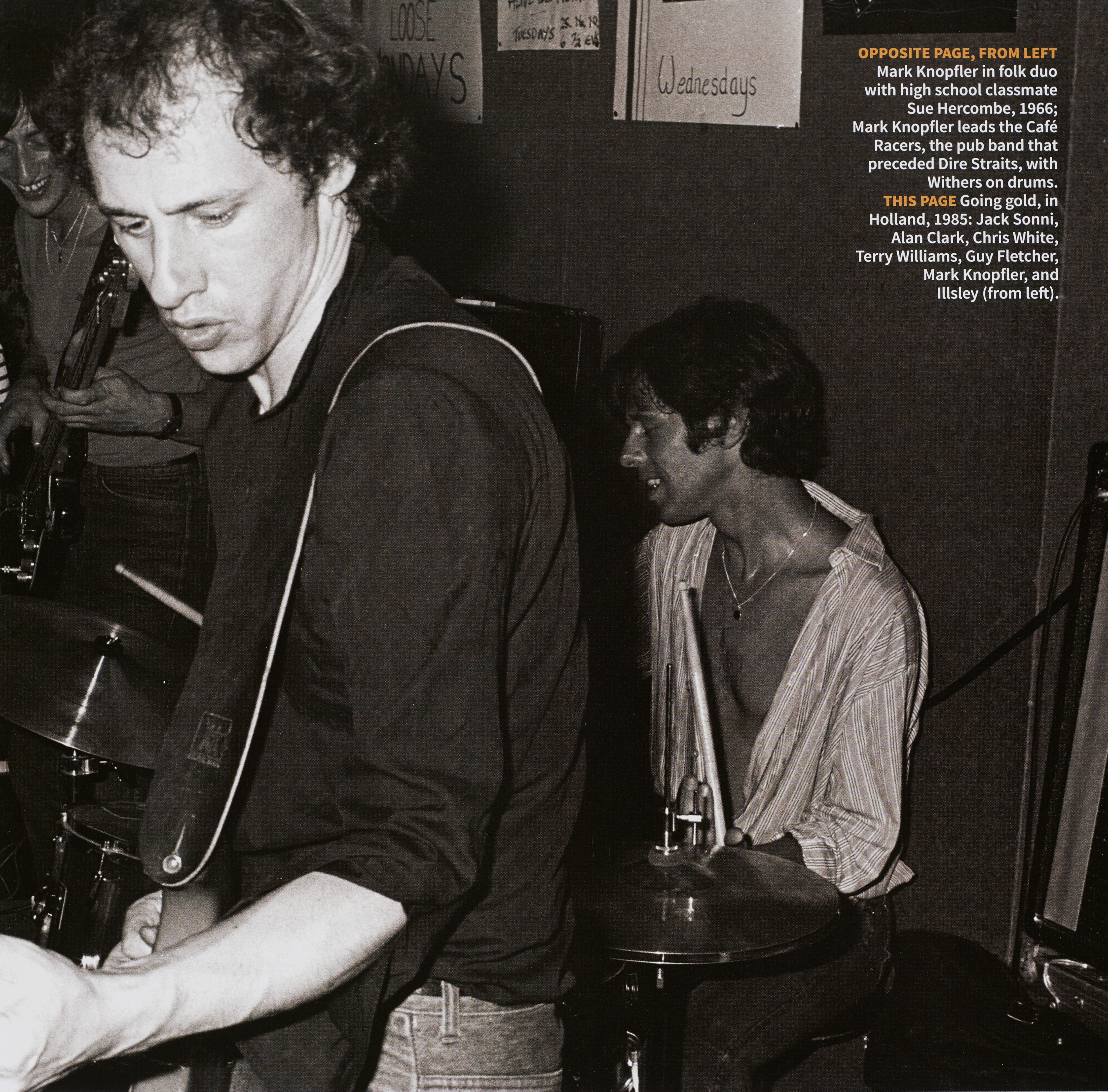
### **Brothers in Arms**

1985 (Vertigo/Warner Bros.)

of note could be most effective, framing a vocal, responsive and illuminating.

He moved in with his younger brother, David, a rhythm guitarist, and a flatmate, John Illsley, who would switch from guitar to bass as a band began to take shape. Drummer Pick Withers was the most experienced musician among them. Mark knew Withers from playing with him in a pub rock band called Brewers Droop. First as the Café Racers, and then as Dire Straits, they began making the rounds of pint-pulling establishments.

In 1977, a five-song demo found its way to Charlie Gillett, whose influential Sunday show on Radio London, *Honky Tonk*, not only celebrated musical virtue from the past, but allowed that such tradition, with an emphasis on craft and commitment, needn't be confined to that past. Music is timeless, the philosophy went, much like the "Sultans of Swing" — even if they're "saving it up for Friday night" and the crowd "dressed in their brown baggies and their platform soles/They don't give a damn about any trumpet-playing band/It ain't what they call Rock & Roll." Dire Straits stood by their muse.



**OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM LEFT**  
Mark Knopfler in folk duo with high school classmate Sue Hercombe, 1966; Mark Knopfler leads the Café Racers, the pub band that preceded Dire Straits, with Withers on drums.  
**THIS PAGE** Going gold, in Holland, 1985: Jack Sonni, Alan Clark, Chris White, Terry Williams, Guy Fletcher, Mark Knopfler, and Illsley (from left).





In mid-February 1978, they entered a Notting Hill studio with producer Muff Winwood and spent three weeks recording their self-titled debut album for Vertigo Records. Taken as a whole, the album's sound was bare to the bone, the essence of a live show distilled. Knopfler's rough-hewn voice served as a textural contrast to his sparkling guitar fills. As each note rode its own dynamic, sans plectrum, he was gifted the space to be more storyteller than mellifluous singer. The songs suggested walks along the quays of Newcastle ("Water of Love," "Down to the Waterline") and around the "Wild West End," an un-hurried stroll through each tale's unfolding.

In much the same way, the album's reception was a slow burner, inching into the lower end of the British charts, understated and free of image down to the blurry picture of — what? — on the album cover. But by the end of the year, "Sultans of Swing" had carved its own niche on the radio.

Encouraged by A&R rep Karin Berg, and sealed when Jerry Wexler met Mark at Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, playing on a session with Mavis Staples, the band signed to Warner Bros. in America. Knopfler's growing repute as a guitarist was such that Wexler brought him into Bob Dylan's *Slow Train Coming* orbit. With Muscle Shoals keyboardist Barry Beckett acting as coproducer, Wexler took Dire Straits to Compass Point for their second album, *Communicé* (1979).

Spare as their debut album had been, *Communicé* enhanced fullness in the rhythm section, Mark evoking a Morricone spookiness in "Once Upon a Time in the West" and the hovering ghost tones haunting "News." But even with the success of "Lady Writer," in which Knopfler saw the rueful reflection of an old girlfriend in a television newscaster — a point of view that presaged the coming of MTV — he sensed there were limitations to Dire Straits' range of motion.

Mark composed much of the third album, *Making Movies* (1980), on the piano, the horizontal expanse of keyboard opening up Dire Straits' horizons. "I began thinking more orchestrally," Knopfler told the *London Times*' Richard Williams. E Street keyboardist Roy Bittan was recruited for the session by producer Jimmy Iovine, playing "The Carousel Waltz" that introduces "Tunnel of Love" with a boardwalk whirl, and underpinning the talk-sung tale-telling of "Romeo and Juliet" and "Skateaway."

Two years later, Alan Clark colorized Dire Straits' sound palette as a full band member on *Love Over Gold*

**OPPOSITE PAGE,**  
**FROM TOP:** Knopfler  
and Clark onstage  
in Rotterdam, 1984;  
the brothers Knopfler,  
New York City, 1979  
**THIS PAGE**  
Live in 1985.





**THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** Hanging in New York City, 1979; with fellow axman Eric Clapton, 1988; Knopfler meets Billy Joel, 1984. **OPPOSITE PAGE** Marking where it all started in 1977: Knopfler and Illsley in 2009.





“THEIR MODE  
WAS CONSIDERED,  
REFLECTIVE,  
OBSERVATIONAL.”

(1982), its epic opening, the fourteen-minute “Telegraph Road,” allowing Knopfler a free range of imagination. And in 1984, one year after the Dire Straits world tour documented on the live *Alchemy* album, Guy Fletcher came aboard to give further breadth, on synthesizer and as willing abettor — a role he continues through today within Knopfler’s solo career. Even as Dire Straits’ stage show and personnel nova’d, their scale kept to the humane, the choice made that is “Love Over Gold”: “To do what you do that you must.”

*Brothers in Arms* did. The album seemed to be everywhere in 1985, with north of twenty million discs sold and many more absorbed through the “I want” of music television. For a band so downplayful and self-effacing, a band that preferred to let the music speak for itself, it’s ironic that “Money for Nothing” captures a pop moment when sound bows to visual, at the onset of a digital age — the past and future of the National Duolian resonator guitar that adorns the cover of *Brothers*. Knopfler was already thinking cinematically: He had begun composing film

scores as early as 1983, with his graceful settings for *Local Hero*. His production of Bob Dylan’s *Infidels* that same year gave him further insight into how to accompany and score. All this came to fruition with *Brothers* — which wore its grandeur on its sleeve, understated and understanding.

After the overwhelming consequence of that touchstone album, Knopfler stepped back to reconsider. He duetted with Eric Clapton, Chet Atkins, and Emmylou Harris; produced Willy DeVille and Randy Newman; and played in an old-fashioned bar band with old friends called the Notting Hillbillies. Dire Straits took a curtain call in 1991, when the band released *On Every Street*, but Knopfler has since contented himself with being a journeyman musician’s musician, his consummate craft savored on eight solo albums, beginning with the Celtic-filtered-through-Nashville *Golden Heart* in 1996.

Knopfler remembers when he didn’t have the luxury of the music, when he worked hard, toiling at the building site or the warehouse. “I always feel lucky I’ve done jobs like that,” he told *Mojo*’s Phil Sutcliffe. He knows that when you sing, or play your guitar, there is a responsibility to touch those who need a milestone in their lives. He begins the opening notes to “Brothers in Arms” on the same fret each night, because that’s the only way it can be played to evoke remembrance of the present.

Last summer I was invited to sing at a family wedding. The bride requested “Over the Rainbow.” Her intended asked for a song to which he and his brothers could stroll down the aisle: “Brothers in Arms,” its chords so circular, its lyrics so true, each phrase a stroke of guitar string, and then the vibrato.