



VOICES IN THE HALL: MARK KNOPFLER

EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

PETER COOPER Welcome to Voices in the Hall, presented by the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum. I'm Peter Cooper. Today, we've got Mark Knopfler.

MARK KNOPFLER I realized that coming down into Tennessee to record was a great thing from the from the get go. Not just the friendships, but the non-pretentious way of approaching recording. That these were people who were in the business of making records at a sensible pace. They weren't taking two weeks to get a drum sound, and they weren't deciding you know what the drug of choice of the day. You know it was a completely different scene from Los Angeles or anywhere else then. For me it was refreshing that you'd be in the business of making the record of your song pretty quickly.

"Sultans of Swing" – Dire Straits (Dire Straits / Warner Records)

PETER COOPER Mark Knopfler's been regarded as one of the most distinctive and inventive guitarists around, since his days fronting Dire Straits, the rock band that sold well over a hundred million albums.

Mark Knopfler grew up in Newcastle, England, fascinated with the country and rock music he heard on the radio, some of which came from American guitar greats including Chet Atkins and Duane Eddy.

While Mark Knopfler is justly lauded as a peer to those peerless artists, he's also launched a second-act as one of the world's more compelling songwriters. He's a master of language and narrative in the same way that he's a master of wood and wire, fretboards and amplifiers. At age 70, Mark Knopfler remains fascinated with music and musicians.

PETER COOPER Mark Knopfler, thank you so much for being here on Voices in the Hall.

MARK KNOPFLER Oh, it's my pleasure.

PETER COOPER Well it's our pleasure to have you in this building. And you aren't known as a country music performer, but we have a big tent notion of what country music is. And so many people that are represented in this museum are one step removed from you. It seems like you've always been in those rooms.

MARK KNOPFLER Well I think I probably started hearing music on the radio when I was so young, I didn't know what it was. I didn't know what country music was. And it was just music that I liked as a little boy you know. I remember my mom telling me I used to listen very serious, very intently, to listen with mother kind of programs and children's favorites. And I was 18 months. So from that age you know through the early years at 3 and 4 years old, the radio was this magic land, musically speaking. And I was



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listening to country music, but I only started to piece that together later. For example, you know there would be hobo songs for instance, there'd be "Big Rock Candy Mountain" playing on the radio. And it wouldn't, now it wouldn't be the Harry McClintock, it would be the Burl Ives version that was more commercial and was probably more radio friendly. So even back then. But I knew all the words to it when I was a tiny little boy, but didn't know what a hobo was. I didn't understand the framework of all the music, but all I knew was that I loved it.

PETER COOPER So that was even before you moved to Newcastle.

MARK KNOPFLER Yeah. That was in Glasgow. Yeah. And then my mum's family were all from Newcastle area. And my dad got a similar job in Newcastle that he was doing in Glasgow. So we moved down there when I was about six or eight or however old I was. And the North of England and Scotland, very similar. And that was a great area for music too so I got a good grounding I think in a fairly wide range of folk music and of what I guess people would call Country music now. But actually Country music was just popular. It was just popular with people. And again, I'm not sure you know whether people knew if they were listening to your you know "Your Cheating Heart" by Ray Charles, whether they were listening to country music. There was an orchestra. They just liked it. And so I think it was accepted with the same big-heartedness you know that you should accept music, that you should embrace music. It was embraced, but not because people were country and western music fans or knowledgeable per se.

PETER COOPER So around 1960 you heard a guitar player, who's also a guest on this show, Voices in the Hall, a man named Duane Eddy with a song called "Because They're Young."

MARK KNOPFLER Yeah that was. "Because They're Young" was a big record for me. There's just something magical about that sound that. And originally I think I was captured by the Shadows as well, you know who were sort of an English version of the Ventures. And it was the twang, you know and the instrumental thing. And it would maybe sometimes be just a little variation on the chords and things here and there from a straight cowboy change. So it would be just giving something magic by that electric guitar. And that captured me. It must have. It must have captured the hearts of thousands and thousands of kids. And there was a little kid up the street, a few doors up the street, who had it on a 45. And I went round there and I intimidated him you know so much. I must have made him play it 30 times you know, one after the other.

I remember there was another couple of instrumentals like that that had the same sort of effect on me. One of them was the Shadows with "Wonderful Land." It just seemed to have this magic to it. And this would be you know. I mean I'd just probably a little a few years before the Beatles hit, and of course the songs. So I'm just talking about instrumentals. And by some, somehow, some accident, I also heard a Fireballs record,



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which was pretty unusual. I don't think people in England had actually heard of the Fireballs, but I somehow got familiar with all of that.

And I was always interested in the groups anyway. You know Cliff Richard had the Shadows, who were actually one of many groups who went under the name of the Drifters. And he made the first, amongst the first British what you'd call rocker records, you know like "Move It" and stuff like that. And, but I was interested in the groups. You know I was always interested in the Jordanaires or I was always interested in Buddy Holly's group you know and Jerry Allison's set up and all of that.

So I kind of realized I was a bit of a fan. You know I was always getting in trouble for singing that stuff at the back of the classroom and bashing my hands on the on the desk. And I don't think the teachers really understood that. You know, "Why are they making that metallic sound at the back of your throat, boy?" Well it was me trying to imitate an electric guitar, you know just trying to do the twang.

PETER COOPER You're talking about twang. You're also talking about tone. Duane Eddy did something that I think you do which is to take a well-trodden instrument, an instrument that so many people have played and that is not all that complex—it's six strings and 12 or 14 frets, you know however your guitar is made up. But to take that and make it sound different is a pretty good trick. What is tone? And how does one achieve it?

MARK KNOPFLER Well I think it comes from style. It's difficult to define. Everybody plays their own way. But I think it's difficult to define, but it's easy to recognize. Because I came up with acoustic music as well as electric music, and being a fan of both but not being able to afford an amplifier, I went down a path of borrowing friends' acoustic guitars and into folk joints and learning how to finger pick.

And learning how to finger pick changed everything I think because all of a sudden you know you're playing takes on a different dimension. And so in a kind of ragged unorthodox way I was moving forward a little bit. And that tended to make me drop the pick as such, although I was playing a lot with a pick at the time. I was playing like Jimi Hendrix style of guitar and like a lot of kids and just wanting to play that way. But the finger picking was going along all the time. And eventually they started to fuse together. And I'd started breaking the rules on the finger picking and playing the lower strings with my fingers and the higher strings with my thumb and fingers and so.

So breaking the rules really as being a guitar teacher's nightmare was probably the way that I progressed and. And so it's a lighter touch than using a big piece of plastic in your hand. It's, I guess it's lighter but you know if you've got the right kind of amplification or whatever you know somehow you just develop your own, what people would call a style.



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PETER COOPER One person who had a style and was also finger picking on electric guitars was Chet Atkins, who you later grew very close to. What do you remember about first hearing Chet? And why do you see him as important?

MARK KNOPFLER Well I remember hearing Chet at a pal's house, and we were both trying to learn how to play the guitar. And he had a Chet album. And I remember hearing it and thinking, "Oh well, forget all that." I mean that's just a whole other galaxy. I'll never enter into that area. Because you have to understand you know to a kid at 15 or 16, however old I was, you know and just learning my, not even the basics, Chet was on a whole other level it seemed to me. And so it was it was a real bombshell when he actually called up on the phone and asked if I'd play on a record. But by then I'd been playing a few years and the picking had started to develop a bit more. And I'd put a bit, a little bit more together with it. But I mean to this day I'm still in absolute admiration for what Chet managed to achieved on his own.

PETER COOPER It's flabbergasting. And that he was doing that often while producing albums and running a record label. An executive who was an absolute groundbreaking guitar player. It's...

MARK KNOPFLER Oh it's astonishing what he achieved. And also I happen to know he was a he was a very sensitive man. And I think those careers in his hands weighed heavy. And he was very concerned because he would be responsible for their recording careers and this and that. And obviously he was very successful in that area, but not everything in the record game is going to necessarily you know bring you fame and fortune. And I think that weighed quite heavily on him, that responsibility.

Not that he wasn't made for the job, and in many ways he had so many talents that he, that was just one of the many things that he could do. But yeah. No. He was a multitalented guy. And he liked nothing more than to spend the day. I mean we spent many days together just playing and chatting and talking about life generally. It was not that he was totally focused on his own development as a player, although that never ceased to interest him. He was always picking things up from other players. And it wouldn't matter if they were jazz musicians or flamenco musicians. You know he would just. He'd suddenly pick up a Spanish guitar and play you know "The Rodriguez Guitar Concerto" from beginning to end. And then just put it down and go "Olé!" you know. "Olé man!" You know he was just phenomenal.

PETER COOPER I like what he said when said, "Well Chet, that guitar sounds magnificent!" And he handed it to the guy and said, "Well you play it and see how it sounds."



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MARK KNOPFLER Yeah or I think it was actually in his dressing room and it was leaning up against the sofa. He just leans it against the sofa. He says, "How does it sound now?"

PETER COOPER Oh. That's better.

MARK KNOPFLER So he was. He did have a sort of a pride in his playing that was quite a fierce thing because it had been so hard won. Chet knew how hard it was to learn to play. So I mean as far as I was concerned, I think he was only interested in me you know because I was a picker, a sort of fellow picker, you know way, way further down the scale. But he sort of took pity on me I think.

PETER COOPER Did he tell you what he liked about your playing?

MARK KNOPFLER Yeah I think it was just that it had some joy in it. It had some life in it, you know. And he was always very attracted to simple playing as well as to you know complex. I mean he was as much into you know a really complex Lenny Breau construct as he was—he would be happy to play a two-chord song all day long. I mean I remember playing "Kentucky" with Chet for the best part of a day.

PETER COOPER Had to be a completely different vibe than. I mean you by then were famous and in a band. And in any band is problematic relationships and there's joyful moments, but there's a lot of egos in the room and a lot of things going on. And this sounds like no tension, let's just sit down and enjoy ourselves.

MARK KNOPFLER Yeah well that would again, I mean it was never arranged and it never used to. It was never, "Hey we'll get together and play guitar all day." I mean it would be, you'd go for breakfast somewhere and you'd just talk about a whole lot of other things. So I think just becoming friends was as important as, as important as anything. And you know really that was the very beginnings of my making friends with people in Nashville.

I got to know my publisher pretty well then, and we've been friends ever since, David Conrad, who is also a guitar picker. And knew Chet and you know one thing would just bounce to another. I mean Chet took me straight to the Opry. And the next thing I know I'm you know chatting to Roy Acuff or somebody. I mean it was ridiculous how these things just came about. It was a tremendous passport to people. And I mean that's how I got to know, through David I got to know, and Chet, I got to know Waylon and people like that. So it was a tremendous thing just to have to come over and.

It was actually to play, or it started just playing on a Chet record. But then we had a good time so we ended up making an album. And it was like a home record, in a way. I mean you know there'd be thermostat on Leona's fridge at Chet's House, that used to



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get on the record. It used to get onto the tape. And then I had a terrible little home studio in London as well that I did probably some more damage to our record on there. But I think Chet was really delighted with it just because, I think for one reason it did really well somehow. And I think that really tickled him, because he'd been making records for so long. And I think the success of that record sort of perked him up no end.

“Poor Boy Blues” – Chet Atkins & Mark Knopfler (Neck and Neck / Sony BMG)

PETER COOPER That was “Poor Boy Blues,” written by a man from West England, Paul Kennerley, and performed in Grammy-winning fashion by Chet Atkins and our Voices in the Hall guest today, Mark Knopfler.

And Paul Kennerley, who wrote that, is somebody who isn't talked about enough, in part because he seems absolutely incapable of talking about himself. But Dave Cobb, the great producer, when he came in here for his podcast, he talked so much about Paul. Emmylou Harris when she was on, talked so much about Paul. What's valuable about this man is as a musician and as a person? I understand you bounce songs off him all the time.

MARK KNOPFLER Yeah. Paul's just got a very genuine love for the music. He's got a hillbilly heart. You know I think it's just a sheer love affair with all of it. And that he's genuinely, genuinely moved by certain aspects of it that would strike him. And he's anxious to share that with people, so anybody that you know ends up in Paul's company usually ends up having a record played to him you know before too many minutes have elapsed. There's something that would strike Paul that you know you should hear. Chet was like that, and David was like that. So you're talking about people who, in a town, who genuinely love music. They're not in it for business reasons. They're in it because they love it. I don't know whether that's as familiar a concept to the world as it used to be. Who knows.

PETER COOPER Now Paul produced and was married to and is now still best friends with somebody that you've collaborated with so often, Emmylou Harris.

MARK KNOPFLER Yeah, I mean that's how these things happen. That is just how these things happen. One minute you're having a sing along somewhere and the next minute you're recording together. And usually, for me it's been a touring thing as well because if I've enjoyed a recording process with somebody it'll usually be me who'll suggest we go and do some dates somewhere. Or traditionally that's what, if I was having a good time, "Well why don't we go and do a few you know do a few dates?" And that's always been me as a sucker for punishment and you know ready to do some more. Give it some more energy. Do something else with it.



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And Emmy and I actually never really got as involved in recording as we should have done. We managed to make the record with just a couple of little sessions. And it was really a little piecemeal thing, but the recording time that we did have was very enjoyable. And that's why the tour happened, just because we were having fun. And again it's just the most innocent of reasons, that we just did having fun working. And I actually, I didn't even know how our voices worked together but they worked if they went in a certain way. But I didn't, I wasn't familiar enough with it for it to be on every song. So it would just work sometimes. It was that sporadic thing where they would just work together really well, now and then you know when we had the harmonies right or the right one was on the right harmony.

PETER COOPER Sometimes it's the conversational singing with her that that is most impactful to me. Something like "Love and Happiness." Your blend on that is just like sitting on the couch and listening to somebody tell you a story.

MARK KNOPFLER [00:29:25] Well hopefully. I mean that's the way that we tried to make it.

"Love and Happiness" – Mark Knopfler and Emmylou Harris (All the Roadrunning / Warner Records)

PETER COOPER "Love and Happiness," recorded by Mark Knopfler and Emmylou Harris, and written by Emmylou and her good friend, Kimmie Rhodes.

PETER COOPER When you are in studio or on stage somebody like Chet Atkins or Richard Bennett, who I feel like is a master, you're obviously one of the most influential and greatest guitarists of our time. Is it difficult to cede ego in those situations? A lot of people get into the electric guitar because they want to shred and make faces.

MARK KNOPFLER Oh well I mean I. No I think. Actually Gillian Welch put it best to me. She said, "All I'm trying to do is write a good song and make a good record." And I've never heard it put better. Because I said, "That's all that I want to do too, if I can." That just says it all. So being a good guitarist, is... I don't know whether I would even use that term. So music is such a humbling area, as anybody who's tried to play guitar would know. And in fact the more you get into it, the more you realize how apt Johnny Smith's summation of it is—he saw the guitar as "my box of mistakes." It's humbling. And certainly knowing Chet was humbling enough. I mean that was enough for one lifetime. I mean. But I'm always you know always hearing instrumentalists who are just humbling and so.

And having the band that I have now with the people that it's got in it is quite enough, thank you, to keep your feet on the ground. Playing with Richard of course, but it's not a guitar thing. You know it's. I mean if you're playing with an amazing trumpet player or a



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phenomenal keyboard player it's all like that. And everybody is approaching their instruments from that side of it. And I've got John McCusker and Mike McGoldrick who are legendary in their own spheres. You know so it's, it's actually inspiring to be around players like that. And in fact I'm the one that makes the mistakes. You know I don't have to live by the guitar. I'm not making a living with it in the same way. I think if you're the songwriter you get away with all kinds of stuff. And as Richard once said. I'd mentioned that to Richard Bennett one day and he said, "Well, the singer is always right."

PETER COOPER Yeah. You mentioned songwriting and to me you and Paul Simon and Nick Lowe are folks that I admire for having changed often the ways that they formulate songs, the ways that they organize structures and the ways that they use language later in life. Do you remember a transition period for you as a songwriter?

MARK KNOPFLER I suppose so. I mean I. But it's a tricky subject because simple is complex. So that's why it's tricky to talk about. And the other way round. And I try to embrace it or you know without, I don't try and be snobbish about music. You know I don't try to. To me, I try and stay keep the same attitude in the sense that "Kentucky," a little 2-chord song, is just as important to me as the most complex stuff that I play. And in fact, again going back to the Chet record, we did a version of "Just One Time." And I remember Chet saying to me, "It's amazing what two chords can create." So that fascinated Chet as much as a guitar concerto would. So that's the way I try to stay. I just try to keep an open mind about all of that stuff. You know the simple things are the most beautiful. And they can be the most challenging things to record, perversely enough. You can't just necessarily just expect, "Oh well this one will be..." That would be a big mistake to go into the studio and say, "Well this one should be easy to knock off."

When a beautiful country track is recorded by players who really know their business, I'm talking about Division 1, there's an awful lot more going into that than people might think. You know they might think, "Oh, well it's got some cowboy chords. I mean how hard can that be?" Well how come then that the studio players are the studio players, and the road bands are the road bands, and the bar bands are the bar bands, and the juke joint bands...? You know. So there are Levels of that.

PETER COOPER There is one hundred decisions made every eight measures, it seems like, between the grouping of people that are there.

MARK KNOPFLER Right. I mean it that then so that those guys. I remember Glenn Worf saying to me, my bass player, who appears to be about as in demand a bass player as a bass player can be, saying you know he knows in the parking lot as he put pulls in what kind of a day is going to have. So everybody wants to work with people that they want to work with.



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PETER COOPER In your live shows you're at a point where you could just go out and go hit, hit, hit, hit, hit, through the whole show and people would be largely satisfied. And yet you continue to challenge and uplift your audiences with something that they haven't heard before. It'd be a lot easier just to just to play it by the book.

MARK KNOPFLER Well I think there's probably, in the end it's a little bit of a combination. I think most artists would finish with something that people kind of know or. You know you might have, know a little bit of that. But I guess if you stick around for long enough you put together so much stuff that you can luxuriate in a bit of a choice. You know. But I would, I think I would get tired of the same sound all the time if I was just making the same sound. I mean if I was just going out with a couple acoustic guitars for instance, I'd start to get tired of it after a while. So one of the one of the things that I'm loving at the moment is just to be able to access all kinds of music you know with the folk thing and with the brass thing and with everything.

PETER COOPER And combining those together.

MARK KNOPFLER Yeah combining it all. And I like breaking the rules with that sort of stuff. So if Mike and John are playing something beautiful in a folk style, I'd like to just barge in through the French windows you know with an electric guitar. I feel at home just playing along in there, spoiling it.

"Boom Like That" – Mark Knopfler (Shangri-la / Warner Records)

PETER COOPER "Boom Like That," a song written by British music icon Mark Knopfler about American hamburger icon Ray Kroc. The guy behind McDonald's. "My name's not Crock, it's Kroc with a "K." Like Crocodile but not spelled that way.

As our friend Ketch Secor of Old Crow Medicine Show often explains, what we call American country music comes from the collision of the banjo, from Africa, and the fiddle, from the British Isles. This music isn't just in Mark Knopfler's hands and brain, it's in his DNA. Through more than fifty years of music-making, he's earned the respect and admiration of numerous American country music greats.

Like when Chet Atkins thinks you're a good guitar player, you are officially a good guitar player. When Emmylou Harris and Mary Chapin Carpenter want to sing your songs, you've got quite a way with a song. When Mark Knopfler comes to visit on your podcast, well, I like to think I've got a really good podcast.

I'm Peter Cooper, and I'm thrilled to have had this discussion with Mark Knopfler, in the audio lair at the Country Music Hall of Fame and Museum in beautiful downtown Nashville, Tennessee. This conversation was recorded by audio czar Alan Stoker and produced by Ben Manilla and Jennie Cataldo of BMP Audio.



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Coming up next time on Voices in the Hall: Aaron Watson.

AARON WATSON I run my business like it's a small hamburger joint. My fans deserve hospitality, they deserve good service, and they deserve a good burger—good music.

PETER COOPER Next time, on Voices in the Hall.