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Hillman's country roots sprout into 'Desert Rose Band'



Chris Hillman

By Nick Welser
POP MUSIC WRITER

The old saying: "You can take the boy out of the country but you can't take the country out of the boy," could have been written about Chris Hillman. While the small southern California town where he was raised was a far cry from the rural south, it was there that Hillman first heard the country and bluegrass sounds which have influenced his own music ever since. Though he has helped create any number of rock 'n' roll amalgams — folk-rock, raga-rock, space-rock and country-rock with The Byrds, bluegrass-rock with the Flying Burrito Brothers, Latin-rock with Manassas and yawn-rock with Souther-Hillman-Furay — Hillman has always been drawn back to the country and bluegrass music which first inspired him as a boy.

"I started out as a mandolin player in high school playing bluegrass music,

and despite all the messing around I did in different groups, my forte was always a country-oriented thing. It's what I started with and it's the only thing I really know how to do," said Hillman recently from his Ventura, Calif., home. "It took me years to realize that you have to go with what you do best and enjoy the most."

Hillman has a new group, the Desert Rose Band, which he will be bringing to the Canal Street Tavern Friday night.

Hillman is excited about his new group. One look at the band member's credentials and his enthusiasm is easily understood. Herb Pedersen, who contributes banjo, rhythm guitar and harmonies, has recorded with James Taylor, Linda Ronstadt, The Dillards, Emmylou Harris and Gordon Lightfoot. He was recently chosen to handle the vocal arrangements on *Trio*, the new album by Dolly Parton, Linda Ronstadt and Emmylou Harris. Steel guitarist

Jay Dee Maness, formerly of Buck Owens and the Buckaroos, first played with Hillman back in 1968 on The Byrds' brilliant *Sweetheart of the Rodeo* LP. Bassist Bill Bryson has recorded with Ry Cooder and David Lindley. Steve Duncan has drummed with Ricky Nelson and with T-Bone Burnett. Newcomer John Jorgenson handles lead guitar and mandolin for Desert Rose.

"This band is what I always wanted the Flying Burrito Brothers to be, we just weren't proficient enough at the time," said Hillman.

He describes Desert Rose as "a six-piece electric country band" whose sound is a cross between "California country and the early music of Buck Owens and Rose Maddox. There's a lot of emphasis on two- and three-part singing in this group."

Hillman and Desert Rose have signed a recording contract with MCA-Curb Records. The group's first single, *Ashes of Love*, is to be released later this

month and their album will follow in April.

Hillman began his recording career playing mandolin with bluegrass outfits like the Scottsville Squirrel Barkers and The Hillmen but in 1964 he changed his feathers and started playing bass with a newly hatched band called The Byrds.

"I had never played bass but when I went into The Byrds they needed a bass player so I really sort of bluffed my way in. I realized after I'd joined that (Roger) McGuinn didn't really know how to play the electric 12-string yet, nor did (David) Crosby," said Hillman. "We isolated ourselves and we played every day. A lot of our sound came out of just experimenting and not having any other outside influence other than the ones we had brought into the group."

Hillman finally left the Byrds' nest in 1968. Ten years later, after finding success with the Flying Burrito Brothers

and with Manassas and chart success but artistic frustration with Souther-Hillman-Furay, Hillman reunited with two of his former Byrd-mates, Roger McGuinn and Gene Clark, under the name McGuinn, Clark and Hillman. They had a top 10 pop hit called *Don't Write Her Off*.

Since then Hillman has brought his recording career full circle by getting back into the country and bluegrass music he began with 25 years ago.

"It seems like I've found the right guys to work with after all these years," said Hillman of his partners in the Desert Rose Band. "I've said it before, but this feels good and I think it's going to work."

■ **CHRIS HILLMAN** and the Desert Rose Band will be appearing at the Canal Street Tavern, 308 E. First St., at 9:30 p.m. Friday. Tickets are \$8.