

THE DESERT ROSE BAND

Chris Hillman's 1968 initiation into the rites of Nashville was nothing less than a baptism by fire. The bassist and founding member of America's quintessential sixties folk/rock group, The Byrds, had traveled with bandmates Roger McGuinn and Gram Parsons to country music's Mecca at the request of Columbia Records. The label had orchestrated a coup of sorts by arranging for The Byrds—whose popularity among rock audiences was at its peak—to perform at country's cornerstone, the Grand Ole Opry, then headquartered at the historic Ryman Auditorium.

The group had recently wrapped up its classic LP "Sweethearts Of The Rodeo," one of the first albums by an established rock group to be recorded in Nashville. Hillman was especially pleased with the chance to acknowledge his solid commitment to country music by appearing on the Opry. Yet, from the moment they took the stage, it became apparent that The Byrds were recipients of a less-than-warm welcome from patrons and fellow performers alike.

"We were a pop group that had just recorded a country album," Hillman recalls today. "No one had done that before. When we started to play, they hooted and hollered. But we kept playing and they liked it and it all worked out okay. We definitely ruffled some feathers down there, but nothing collapsed. Nothing went away. We didn't destroy any tradition. People just weren't exactly ready to have a West Coast rock band on their stage."

In the ensuing years, Hillman's stature as a critical link in the sometimes-stormy marriage of country and rock 'n roll has achieved near-legendary proportion. Shortly after the pivotal Opry performance, Hillman and Gram Parsons left The Byrds to form the Flying Burrito Brothers. Six landmark albums later, the Burritos disbanded after having established themselves as trailblazers to the explosion of 70's Southern California singer/songwriters like: The Eagles, Jackson Browne and Dan Fogelberg.

From 1971 to 1973, Hillman joined forces with Stephen Stills for the Manassas project, which yielded two top-selling albums and packed-house national tours.

With ex-Poco member Richie Furay and tunesmith John David Souther, Hillman reeled in a gold album (Souther-Hillman-Furay) and a top 20 single ("Fallin' in Love") in 1974 as one-third of the critically acclaimed Souther-Hillman-Furay band.

Hillman then recorded two solos LPs, "Slippin' Away" and "Clear Sailing," before reuniting with ex-Byrds McGuinn and Clark to record and tour in the late 70's.

During a self-imposed hiatus from the music scene in 1981, Hillman was inspired to return to his country roots when Sugar Hill Records re-released the classic bluegrass LP "The Hillmen." The album was recorded in the mid-sixties when Hillman was a fresh-faced member of California's popular bluegrass group The Golden State Boys. With fellow Golden Staters Vern and Rex Gosdin and Don Parmley, Hillman formed the Hillmen quartet in an effort to perform the purest possible bluegrass. Twenty years later, the effort remains a standard-setting testament to Hillman's down-home heritage.

With a renewed musical mandate, Hillman in 1982 assembled an all-star cast of players, including fiddler Byron Berline and steel guitarist Al Perkins. The resulting album, "Morning Sky," was a critical success and catalyst for Hillman's future country ventures.

"Morning Sky's" successor, "Desert Rose," offered an oasis of folk, rural, rock and country samplings by a solid group of veteran musicians including: James Burton (Elvis Presley, Ricky Nelson, Emmylou Harris), Bernie Leadon (Eagles), Herb Pedersen, Jay Dee Maness and Byron Berline.

That album laid the foundation for Hillman's most promising country undertaking to date. The Desert Rose Band, featuring long-time cohorts Herb Pedersen, John Jorgenson, Jay Dee Maness, Bill Bryson and Steve Duncan, heralds a significant development in today's country music scene.

Pedersen's stand-out career as a session man and ace vocalist (Johnny Rivers, Kenny Rogers, Linda Ronstadt and John Denver) was recently capped by his direction of the vocal arrangements for the much-anticipated "Trio" album by Dolly Parton, Linda Ronstadt and Emmylou Harris. Herb contributes rhythm guitar, banjo and harmonies to The Desert Rose Band.

With a degree in Woodwinds from California's University of the Redlands, Jorgenson's classical training in clarinet was eventually converted to lead electric guitar, acoustic guitar and mandolin. His crisp, unassuming guitar work sets a vibrant, steady tone for the new material.

Steel virtuoso Jay Dee Maness, an alumnus of Buck Owens and the Buckaroos, brings to the group a rich and varied background with country's heaviest hitters. Maness is also in steady demand as one of the premier studio steel men.

Electric and acoustic bassist Bryson has logged extensive film work, including the soundtrack for the motion picture *The Long Riders*, with Ry Cooder and David Lindley.

Bryson's rhythm mate, drummer Steve Duncan, is a versatile core member whose resume boasts an eclectic array of artists, from Roger Miller and Ricky Nelson to rocker T-Bone Burnett.

"They are a bunch of pros who like to play music," says Hillman of his current colleagues. "We have a good time when we do it and we do it as long as it's a good time. We are not making-up false scenarios of truck driving or cheating songs, we're just putting a little more substance into the lyrics and concentrating on two-and-three-part vocals."

The group's first single, "Ashes of Love" (a Johnny & Jack original), from their MCA/Curb album "The Desert Rose Band" introduces audiences to Chris Hillman at his best — a skilled writer and performer rightfully taking his place at the forefront of the New Traditionalist movement, a genre whose path was forged by Hillman and his peers over two decades ago. Honky-tonk hitmakers like Dwight Yoakam, Randy Travis, George Strait, Ricky Skaggs, The Judds and Reba McEntire have acknowledged Hillman's influence.

Hillman's years on the road are complemented by an impressive catalog of songs written for himself and others. Among the artists who have recorded his songs are Emmylou Harris, The Oak Ridge Boys, Dan Fogelberg, Tom Petty and rock poet Patti Smith. Hillman's classic "Sin City," penned with Gram Parsons, is included in the Smithsonian's Collection of Country Music.

A native of San Diego County, Hillman was reared in a town of 800, cutting his teeth on country/bluegrass legends like Spade Cooley, Cliffie Stone, Pete Seeger, Bill Monroe, Flatt & Scruggs and the Everly Brothers.

His first band, The Scottsville Squirrel Barkers, recorded a supermarket-sale album in three hours, netting each band member a total of ten dollars. Their California tour included a gig at Disney's Frontierland and similar outdoor venues. From there, Hillman's allegiance to West Coast country merged with a passion for the burgeoning rock 'n roll scene that would eventually lead to the founding of The Byrds.

Today, Hillman is quick to allay fears that his early successes may present an obstacle or two to the success of The Desert Rose Band.

"I'm not trying to recapture anything," he stresses. "There's nothing that got loose from me to recapture. I'm just doing what I do. It comes out of me and people either like it or they don't. It's that simple. If I can make a sound that is appealing and can make somebody feel good, that's what counts."

To me, country music is still a great art form," he continues. "What I do is an art form. That's the bottom line."

If early critical and listener response to the meticulous melodies and smooth harmonies of The Desert Rose Band is any indication, the pioneer rocker with hardcore country roots is destined for a much warmer reception by the Grand Ole Opry next time around.