
A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

The Desert Rose Band covers a lot of country

POP MUSIC REVIEW

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To find real country music, Dwight Yoakam once told a reporter, go drop a quarter in a jukebox in Bakersfield.

From Merle Haggard and Buck Owens to Yoakam, the California country sound has managed to survive even during C&W's darkest days, when Nashville was busy trying to turn people like Crystal Gayle into pop stars.

The Desert Rose Band, led by former Byrd and Flying Burrito Brother Chris Hillman, has joined the tradition of that West Coast contingent. Earlier this year, the group released a self-titled album of generally upbeat country tunes laced with faint traces of the folk-rock sound that the Byrds helped create in the late '60s. Hillman and the Desert Rose Band came to the Hard Rock Cafe Tuesday night and delivered a solid set of songs from the album along with selected covers from old-time heroes such as Owens and the legendary Louvin Brothers.

The performance was remarkably fresh—the band is too new and eager to have succumbed yet to burnout—and singer/guitarist Hillman received brilliant support from the musicians, who included veteran pedal-steel player Jay Dee Maness and John Jorgenson on guitar and mandolin.

The band was decked out in dazzling sequined western garb designed by Manuel, a protege of Nudie, the late Hollywood tailor famous for his flamboyant creations.

The show covered much of the material from *The*

Desert Rose Band LP. The latest single, *Love Reunited*, came second in the lineup.

The musicians swung quickly through the Louvin Brothers' lovelorn but lively two-stepper *I Can't Make You Fall in Love With Me* and then turned to a new song written by Hillman called *For the Rich Man*.

"This is our little jab at the State Department and Central America," said Hillman in introducing the song, which is probably too political for country radio to stomach. Jorgenson's Spanish flourishes on mandolin were particularly lovely.

Time Between, a Hillman-penned Byrds song from 1967 that's been reworked by the Desert Rose Band, echoed the Ricky Skaggs Band with its invigorating shot of bluegrass, and the pretty ballad *He's Back and I'm Blue* served the band nicely.

The breaking-up saga of *Leave This Town*, given a rock 'n' roll punch Tuesday, is a good example of great songwriting from one of America's great songwriters (Hillman), and *Step On Out* found the singer clowning around and forgetting lyrics (which, surprisingly, were provided by someone in the audience).

Hillman stepped back a couple of times and let his musicians take the spotlight. Guitarist Herb Pedersen sang a very effective, countrified version of James Taylor's *You Can Close Your Eyes*, and Jorgenson sang one of his own compositions, *All the Difference in the World*.

The band continued through *Hello, Trouble*, an amiable, old Buck Owens tune, and finished up with the heavenly harmonies of *Ashes of Love* and an encore rendition of *Wheels*.

The respectable-sized, though hardly overflowing crowd at the Hard Rock seemed like a mainly country bunch. And, to be sure, Desert Rose is mainly a country band. It's also one of the best additions to a new-old country sound that's busting out all over, while rock 'n' roll simply continues to stagnate and repeat itself.