

THE DESERT ROSE BAND

The Desert Rose Band's second MCA/Curb album, *Running*, somehow stretches the boundaries of country music at both ends of the scale. On one end, the virtuoso level of the musicianship and the pointed social commentary of the songs add two new dimensions to country music. And on the other end, the obvious influences of such classic sounds as bluegrass and Buck Owens give The Desert Rose Band a truer country sound than most of their contemporaries. Consequently, *Running* is more sophisticated and, at the same time, more traditional than the standard country album.

Desert Rose Band leader Chris Hillman attributes the traditional country elements to the regional country sound of Southern California. The new dimensions also are rooted in the background of the individual members. Hillman and Desert Rose singer/banjoist Herb Pedersen in particular were not just influenced by progressive country leaders of the late 60's and early 70's, they *were* among those leaders. As a member of the Byrds and later the Flying Burrito Brothers, Hillman was a founding father of country rock, and Pedersen's work on Linda Ronstadt's country efforts helped push country music into the pop marketplace.

Hillman and Pedersen have known each other since they were teenagers getting into bluegrass music. For Hillman, the concept of combining traditional and progressive country music goes that far back, to the Golden State Boys, a group he played in with Vern Gosdin (the same Vern Gosdin who is now a country star), his late brother Rex Gosdin and Don Parmley (now of the Bluegrass Cardinals). The Gosdins were from Alabama and, Hillman recalls, "They were my 'window' from Southern California, my first touch of authenticity. This was a bluegrass band, and then the name was changed to the Hillmen. We were doing Dylan material and Woody Guthrie stuff and trying to get into a little broader scope than bluegrass, more than just getting up there and doing Lester Flatt and Earl Scruggs material. We were trying to expand on that. It was all part of the building process."

In addition to bluegrass, the country music that was being played on the West Coast had a strong influence on Hillman. It was a scene that does not always get the credit it deserves in country music histories, he believes. "Wynn Stewart was virtually overlooked as an artist," Hillman says. "I'm sure he was a great influence on Buck Owens and Merle Haggard. Rose Maddox is greatly overlooked, and Spade Cooley. These are the giants of the West Coast sound. I've always said it's a different kind of music. It's regional because of the different influences out here."

In the mid-60's, Hillman joined the Byrds, the band which put electric guitars behind Bob Dylan's songs and invented folk/rock music. In 1968, with Gram Parsons in the group, they recorded a country album, *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, which was never a commercial success but is generally considered to be the beginning of country/rock music. Country music did not welcome the new sound, as evidenced by a lukewarm reception given the Byrds on a Grand Ole Opry guest spot, but Hillman and Parsons continued to develop their ideas in another influential group, the Flying Burrito Brothers.

After six albums, the Burritos disbanded, and from 1971-1973 Hillman joined Stephen Stills for album and the 1974 Top 20 single "Fallin' in Love". Two solo albums followed, and then Hillman reunited with former Byrds Roger McGuinn and Gene Clark.

The Byrds reunion was not satisfying to either Hillman or McGuinn. "We were spinning our wheels," Hillman recalls. "We did not know what we were doing or who we were anymore, and we opted to break this up as friends. Roger went off and started playing acoustic shows and I did too. I really just wanted to get away from the business and the changing tone of the business, and I went back to square one, which is what I did when I met Vern Gosdin - playing the mandolin. And for two years acoustically it was a fabulous education. It was like going back out onstage without a wall of sound behind you and four other people you could lean on. It was me and Al Perkins as a duo with no amplification. It was all acoustic and it really let me relearn my craft, so to speak. Improved my singing and my rapport with the audience a hundred percent. It was part of that divine plan. I don't know how it works, but we all look over our shoulder at what we've done and say 'That was supposed to have happened.' And you know everything works out."

As Hillman was dropping back to an acoustic stance, Sugar Hill Records re-released "The Hillmen" album. With revived interest, Hillman recorded a country album, *Morning Sky*, in 1982, and then followed it with *Desert Rose*. The album was a sampling of folk, country and rock music. But as Hillman explains, "I never really went out and toured or any of that because I did it as a labor of love, and I had no intention of putting an electric band together."

The Desert Rose Band actually began in the summer of 1985. Hillman and Pedersen had played and sung on a bluegrass album by Dan Fogleberg, and then put together an acoustic group at Fogleberg's request to open tour dates. The group included John Jorgenson and bassist Bill Bryson. "When we got off the road in the fall of '85," Hillman recalls, "I had a lot of songs that I had written that John kept pestering me about, that he felt would be better suited in an electric format. And we literally got a call to do the L.A. Street Scene (a multi-stage festival event), and I thought, 'Well, let's try it.' We got Jay Dee Maness to play steel, he's an old friend, and Steve Duncan, who I really didn't know, as the drummer, and he turned out great. It was fun. It was very haphazard and we actually got some songs done, and then I booked us into a couple of small clubs."

Before they played their first notes together, The Desert Rose Band's credentials were impressive. Pedersen's session credits include vocal work with Kenny Rogers, Linda Rondstadt and Johnny Rivers, plus directing vocal arrangements for the Ronstadt-Dolly Parton-Emmylou Harris *Trio* album. Jorgenson, in addition to being an accomplished guitarist and mandolinist, holds a degree in Woodwinds and has played with Benny Goodman, the Windham Hill Extravaganza and Rose Maddox. Bryson has played bass in the Country Gazette and the Bluegrass Cardinals and on motion picture soundtracks, including *The Long Riders*. Maness' session credits include playing steel for the Byrds, Ronnie Milsap and Rod Stewart, and he is an alumnus of Buck Owens' band. And Steve Duncan's drumming credits range from Ricky Nelson to Roger Miller to T-Bone Burnett.

One of the club bookings in Los Angeles was a showcase in February of 1986 at the Palomino. Dick Whitehouse of Curb Records "really jumped out of his seat and wanted to make a deal right away," Hillman recalls. "That was how the band started. We thought we'd run it up the flagpole and see if it worked."

The Desert Rose Band debuted with flying colors. Four chart singles (a remake of Johnnie and Jack's "Ashes Of Love", the Hillman penned "One Step Forward" and "Love Reunited", and the most recent hit "He's Back And I'm Blue") illustrated the group's unique combination of old and new, and the album immediately established them as a group of extraordinary musicians.

Their second album, *Running*, further develops The Desert Rose Band's distinctive voice in country music. The sound is true to the band's beginnings as a live act. "I wanted to capture the way we play live as much as possible so most of these tracks were cut live," Hillman says. "All the solos were done live. I feel that the greatest problem in making an album is capturing that live sound. I really don't like to create paint-by-number songs."

As vital as the sound are the songs. With the exception of a John Hiatt tune and a remake of the old Buck Owens record "Hello Trouble," all the material was written by Hillman. Seven were co-written with Steve Hill, a musician friend of Hillman's in Ventura, California. The songs paint pictures of people in real life situations: a father who can't settle down ("Running") and later a daughter whose father is often gone ("Summer Wind"), a woman with no home ("Homeless") and one who can't escape home ("Livin' in the House"). The song subjects broaden the concept of country, but they fit in perfectly with the concept of The Desert Rose Band - adding new dimensions to traditional elements. Hillman sums it up in "Our Songs," the final cut on *Running*: "Let us sing our songs the way they're meant to be/ Our troubles and trials in three-part harmony."