

'Troubles and trials in three-part harmony'

Desert Rose: '60s to '80s

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The country-rocking Desert Rose Band is bringing the spirit of the '60s to the '80s in more ways than one.

Musically, the rising MCA/Curb Records act produces an up-to-date version of the crisp-picking, high-singing country-rock sound that its members helped pioneer in the late 1960s.

And lyrically, the Desert Rose Band is creating its own kind of message music — singing about today's "troubles and trials in three-part harmony."

"We didn't sit down and say, 'We're going to bring protest music to Nashville,'" leader Chris Hillman said during a recent interview. "I didn't want to be on a soapbox or dictate any social issues to the world.

"I think the songs are pretty special."

The socially conscious songs Hillman is excited about are included in *Running*, a far-reaching LP composed of eight of his songs, John Hiatt's *She Don't Love Nobody* and the country classic *Hello Trouble*.

The band's "protest" tunes deal in a personal way with subjects including the homeless (*Homeless*) the plight of Central American refugees (*For the Rich Man*) and political apathy (*Our Songs*).

"The Desert Rose Band is not trying to be ('60s protest songster) Phil Ochs," Hillman said. "We have to walk that fine line of judgment."

With its insightful songs and virtuosic playing, the Desert Rose Band feels at home everywhere from Texas honky-tonks to New York clubs.

"The Odessa (Texas) Chili Cookoff, we can play there, and we also go into the Bottom Line," Hillman said. "It's the same show — sometimes we'll throw in an extra country shuffle at a country date."

In addition to Hillman, the band includes guitarist-vocalist Herb Pedersen, multi-instrumentalist John Jorgenson, steel guitarist Jay Dee Maness, bassist Bill Bryson and drummer Steve Duncan. The band's high level of musical ability



The Desert Rose Band combines sharp musicianship, country-rock harmonies and thoughtful songwriting on its new LP *Running*.

comes through strongly, whether on stage or in the studio.

"People come up and say we sound like our records; well, it's the same instruments, the same amps and the same people," Jorgenson said.

"When they say, 'You sound like your records,' that's a real compliment."

The members' list of credentials is long and impressive: Hillman was a founding member of the Byrds and the Flying Burrito Brothers,

Pedersen a ubiquitous L.A. studio musician and a member of the Dillards, and Maness a player in demand by everyone from Rod Stewart to Buck Owens. Jorgenson is a super picker who recently put out his own solo album, Bryson is a bluegrass/soundtrack veteran and Duncan has drummed for Ricky Nelson, Roger Miller and others.

"Sometimes people that aren't familiar with our background say, 'I guess you've come over to country now that you can't play rock,'"

said Hillman, whose country roots extend back to before his days with the Byrds.

Pedersen said: "I think a lot of people just know us as a country act. They don't know who the Byrds are or the Flying Burrito Brothers or the Dillards."

Jorgenson said: "There are old ladies who bring us stuff like cakes decorated with our song titles."

Although "die-hard Byrds fans" still make up part of Desert Rose audience, the band's crowds are in-

creasingly composed of people either too young or too old to be drawn by members' earlier music.

Instead, listeners know the group from hits such as *Ashes of Love*, *Love Reunited*, *One Step Forward* and *He's Back and I'm Blue*, all from the first Desert Rose LP. The band's venture into topical material on its second LP sprang from the creative process rather than from a conscious plan, members said.

"We just wanted to make a good

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album," Hillman said.

Added Jorgenson: "Having the different subject matter allows us to play and sing a little differently. Kind of like (Suzanne Vega's) *Luka* — that really hit the nail on the head. And with Tracy Chapman successful now, I'm glad to see some substance coming into music."

Homeless and *For the Rich Man* use vivid stories to comment on issues straight from the headlines.

"It's people just like you and me at the end of the road," Hillman sings in *Homeless*, a song inspired after a face-to-face meeting with a street person.

"I saw a woman who had the look in her, not of a drug addict or a mental patient, but just of a person," he said. "(Co-writer) Steve Hill and I concocted a scenario based on that."

The tune includes such real-life details as the woman's separation from an alcoholic husband, the loss of their home and her inability to get a job without a telephone number to give prospective employers.

Hillman composed *For the Rich Man* after watching the film *El Norte* about Guatemalan refugees. The tune that best sums up the social comment side of the Desert Rose Band is *Our Songs*, a bluegrass ode to commitment and freedom of expression.

"How much do we compromise in what we want to say/ How much creativity did we lose along the way?" the band sings. "We try to shape the world like a sculptor with one hand/ Oh how can we sing our song?"

Said Hillman: "It's a tribute to that feeling of the '60s. I don't see the college kids addressing the issues in this country — they're buying all this Reagan business — not that Dukakis is this shining light.

"It's funny though, you're at your most liberal when you're a kid. I don't see the young kids addressing the issues and saying, 'Wait a minute, there's racism here, there's this issue and that issue.'"

"I'm curious as to why the American voter is so apathetic — that they're buying this." ■