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SUN-TIMES
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CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 15, 1989



Former Byrd and Flying Burrito Brother Chris Hillman (fourth from left) and the Desert Rose Band will perform their country music chart-toppers tonight at the Clearwater Saloon, 3937 N. Lincoln.

Desert Rose Band blossoms with four No. 1 country hits

By Dave Hoekstra

The sweet smell of success isn't affecting the Desert Rose Band.

Led by singer-guitarist Chris Hillman, a former Byrd and Flying Burrito Brother, the Desert Rose Band is the brightest flower in the country music pot. The six musicians have had four straight No. 1 country singles: "One Step Forward" and "He's Back and I'm Blue" (from their first MCA/Curb album, "The Desert Rose Band") and "Summer Wind" and "I Still Believe in You" (from their second album, "Running").

The band combines rural rock with country rhythms and folk instrumentation. Multi-instrumentalist John Jorgenson spreads his flowing classical and jazz influences across acoustic guitar, lead electric guitar and mandolin. Banjo player and rhythm guitarist Herb Pederson creates the tasteful harmony that is so essential to radio airplay.

Last week the Desert Rose Band released another single, a hard-edged cover of John Hiatt's "She Don't Love Nobody," previously understated by Nick Lowe. They will play their hits and some new material tonight at the Clearwater Saloon, 3937 N. Lincoln. Ken Carley and the Cadillac Cowboys will open the show at 9:30; the Desert Rose Band should hit the stage around 11:15.

Hillman has kept the band's fortunes in perspective, to the point where he recently pulled the plug on the third Desert Rose album.

"I don't want to . . . presume anything we do is going to jump up on the charts," Hillman said in a phone interview from New York City. "We started the third album

about a month ago, and we're going to resume recording the first part of April. I stopped it, I didn't like what we were doing."

Some of the new songs weren't up to par with the tunes on the first two Desert Rose records, he said. Material on "Running" deals with the homeless. "For the Rich Man" is Hillman's sobering "response to the film 'El Norte,'" which told the story of Guatemalan political refugees who migrated to the United States.

"The [new] lyrics were lightweight," Hillman said. "I want to go progressively uphill and make each album better than the one before. We needed to take more time with the third record. . . . We have the ball and we're making touchdowns. I want to be real careful and not call a bunch of bad plays. It's a cheap sports analogy, but if I drop the ball too many times—and I only base this on my past experience—there's somebody else on the bench waiting. I just think every album is crucial."

Despite such recent recognition as receiving a nomination as best vocal group from the Academy of Country Music, Hillman argued that people don't know about the band. "We still have a major visibility problem," he said. "We are the best-kept secret in the country. We get this massive radio play, and people still don't know who we are."

A Hillman affiliation from 20 years ago may raise the profile of the Desert Rose Band. Hillman is thinking about joining David Crosby and Roger McGuinn for a limited Byrds reunion tour this summer. "I want to work with David and Roger a lot," Hillman said. "But I don't want to discuss what I've put

three years into, and that's the Desert Rose Band. The Byrds can be intriguing to the public for this summer, but who knows what would happen later? That has to be worked around. The Desert Rose Band is the priority in my life."

The Byrds tour was born as a response to tribute bands that used the name of the long-defunct folk-rock group. The most recent Byrds offshoot band, led by original drummer Michael Clarke, played decidedly non-Byrd venues, such as Las Vegas.

"We like Mike, and there's no vendetta against him," Hillman said. "But [original vocalist] Gene Clark had used the name prior to him. Now, Mike Clarke is out there with this . . . bunch of musicians. David Crosby called me in January and said we had to register the name. But we had to do some shows to show our legal right." Crosby, Hillman and McGuinn played a few dates in small cafes and clubs around the Los Angeles area. "Musically, the shows were great," Hillman said. "Now the name is safely tucked away. My line was if we were lucky enough to get inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame next year, 40 people would stand up to get the award."

The Desert Rose Band will perform tonight in what is emerging as the city's No. 1 country music club. Last weekend, the Clearwater enlarged the rear of the club. Owner Bill Whitfield said further expansion is in the works, which would increase the seating from the current 230 to 340. Confirmed bookings include Cajun accordionist Joel Sommer on March 29 and ex-Oak Ridge Boy William Lee Golden on April 6.