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# New band brings 'rocker' back to country

By Walter Tunis  
Contributing music critic

Chris Hillman has heard it all. In the late '60s, he had the bluegrass world in a whirl when he left his Southern California country roots for the rock 'n' roll sounds of the Byrds.

Now, after 15 years of touring and recording in a host of noted electric bands — from the Flying Burrito Brothers to Stephen Stills' Manassas — Hillman has returned to country music by way of the Desert Rose Band. The group will perform at Rhinestones Music Palace on Thursday.

So how do the rockers in the audience feel about that?

"I've had people say to me, 'Gee, Chris. You're playing country music now. Couldn't compete anymore in rock 'n' roll, huh?'"

"I just tell them, 'Hey, pal. I was playing the most traditional form of country music there is back in 1962 when I was a 17-year-old kid.'"

The "tradition" Hillman refers to is bluegrass music. He cut his musical teeth on bluegrass as a member of the Golden State Boys more than 25 years ago. The California group was led by now-notable country singer Vern Gos-



Desert Rose Band uses different elements in its music.

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Bluegrass is the key to all the fine music Hillman has recorded over the years. It hasn't been the dominant musical force on his recordings, but it is the style that holds it all together.

"Anybody starting out in bluegrass needs to pay heed to the masters — Flatt and Scruggs, the Osborne Brothers and J.D. Crowe," Hillman said recently from his

home in Ventura, Calif. "Anybody starting out in country music should go to bluegrass school for two years. It's the best music you can learn."

Bluegrass is only one of many elements at work in the music of the Desert Rose Band. The mood is more electric in the current single, a cover of John Hiatt's "She Don't Love Nobody." The group also explores California country sounds,

such as a swing-style version of the Buck Owens hit "Hello Trouble," which will be the next single from the group's latest album, *Running*.

Hillman refers to the traditionally based country of the Desert Rose Band as a "highly evolved" version of the music he was cutting in the late '60s when he split from the Byrds to form the Flying Burrito Brothers with Gram Parsons, the late, legendary country pioneer.

"The Burritos had the great idea, and they had the songs," Hillman said. "But the Desert Rose Band can execute those ideas better. We're better singers, we're better players. It's been 20 years. We ought to be."

Hillman still has a great love for the first Burritos album, 1969's *The Gilded Palace of Sin*. So much so that during the Desert Rose Band's last Lexington show — which came less than a month after the release of its first album in 1987 — the singer included several tunes from *Palace* in the set.

It was a terrific night, but there were fewer than 100 people in the crowd at Breeding's. Hillman and company — harmony singer and guitarist Herb Pederson, guitarist John Jorgenson, bassist Bill Bryson, steel guitarist Jay Dee Maness and

drummer Steve Duncan — performed such Burritos classics as "Sin City" and an assortment of newer Desert Rose hits, including "One Step Forward."

But Hillman also provides a treat for fans still caught up in the '60s folk, rock and country sound of the Byrds. Along with original Byrd vocalist Roger McQuinn, Hillman has cut a new version of Bob Dylan's "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere."

Originally a centerpiece tune to the 1968 Byrds album *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*, the new version was released as a single two weeks ago and will be included in the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band's coming country collaboration *Will the Circle Be Unbroken, Part II*.

There may be even more new Byrds music later in the year. Hillman, McQuinn and fellow Byrd mate David Crosby reunited for a series of concerts early in 1989 that went so well that Hillman said the three were planning more shows and perhaps even an album by the fall.

"We did three shows earlier in the year that sold out in a matter of hours," Hillman said. "But beyond any of that, the music was so good. We had fun and everything sounded great."