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Desert Rose plays country just right for thinking folks

By Elena Jarvis
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A rose is a rose is a rose, unless it's the Desert Rose Band. Then, it's a garden of musical delights.

On Friday night, during its second appearance at the Ventura Theatre, the Desert Rose Band headlined a double-bill that was a

In concert

songwriters' showcase for listeners and old home week for the musicians.

Just voted 1988's touring band of the year by the Academy of Country Music, the Desert Rose Band is country-western for thinking folks. Actually, it's unfair to label Desert Rose as a "country" band when the themes and melodies of its songs are so far-reaching.

You'll find nary a tear in this band's beer. Band leader and former Byrd Chris Hillman, a nine-year Ventura County resident, addresses issues and not simply emotion in his music. On Friday night, there was "Homeless," a song inspired by those who live in and around the Ventura River bottom; "For the Rich Man," an ode to the common people of Nicaragua, caught in a war not of their making; and "Our Songs," which laments the lack of conscience and commitment among the young.

Desert Rose's 90-minute show also included the remaining seven tracks off the group's latest album, "Running" on MCA Records, tunes from the group's self-titled debut album and a preview of material yet to be recorded.

Hillman took most of the lead vocals and accompanied himself on various acoustic guitars fitted with electronic pickups and a battery pack attached to his belt.

Like the rest of the band — with the exception of pedal steel player Jay Dee Maness, who appeared to be wearing a sequin-spangled suit by Nudie's — Hillman dressed casually for the Ventura Theatre performance, sticking with basic blue jeans and a black western shirt.

Attired in various degrees of western wear was the rest of the band: John Jorgenson on vocals, mandolin and guitar; guitarist and banjo picker Herb Pedersen, renowned for his vocal harmonies; drummer Steve Duncan; and bassist Bill Bryson.

Their set included rock 'n' roll, too, in the form of John Hiatt's "She Don't Love Nobody." Among many highlights was "Once More," a plaintive paean to pure country music and a centerpiece for Pedersen's flawless tenor.

Opening the show was the Steve Hill Band, a five-piece group that played an hour's worth of original music, some Cajun tunes and gems by Hank Williams and Gregg Allman.

That Steve Hill performed 60 minutes of original material isn't remarkable unless music lovers know his history. With Hillman, the Thousand Oaks resident co-wrote seven of the 10 songs included on "Running" and contributed to the bulk of material on Desert Rose's 1987 debut LP.

Followers of the Hillman/Hill collaboration wondered how Hill would handle the dilemma. It's not good show business form to upstage a headliner, even if you did co-write most of the music.

Not to worry, Hill apparently has a wealth of songs left to mine. Starting at 9 p.m. on the nose, the Steve Hill Band immediately won hoots of approval and shouts of "Where's the dance floor?" Among those new songs, no doubt earmarked for some future Desert Rose or Steve Hill project, was the country lullabye "Biding My Time," another Hillman/Hill gem.

Hill is a multi-instrumentalist, but during the Ventura Theatre show he limited himself to vocals, guitar and fiddle. (He plays a mean mandolin, keyboards and other instruments too.)

Although it might be some time before Desert Rose returns to Ventura, look for Hill at the Shores in Oxnard, Mondays through Wednesdays, and on Thursdays at D.W. Montgomery's at Channel Islands Harbor.