



Democrat-Herald/Stanford Smith

Guitarists Herb Pedersen, left, and Chris Hillman of The Desert Rose Band practice harmonies during a sound check.

Desert Rose plays to record crowd

By **JEFF KEATING**
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Chris Hillman is nothing if not facetious.

"These guys?" he said of his five-piece Desert Rose Band. "These guys can't hold a tune. It's pretty sad."

Hillman was kidding, of course, and he can get away with it. As one of the co-founders of The Byrds, one of the most successful and critically praised bands of the 1960s and early '70s, he has more than 25 years of professional experience working in his favor.

That experience came to the fore Thursday night in Monteith Riverpark, when the Desert Rose Band entertained a crowd of more than 9,600 — a new attendance record — during the latest installment of the River Rhythms concert series.

The band, which formed in 1987, provided a full slate of country- and bluegrass-influenced tunes culled largely from their three albums, all of which are available on the MCA/Curb label.

The music ranged from the foot-tapping pace of "I Don't Want to Leave This Town" to "Come A Little Closer," a new composition available on the band's first greatest hits album, which is scheduled for release later this year.

The night's entertainment also included a strong

cover of Bob Dylan's "You Ain't Goin' Nowhere," which Hillman also recorded with the Byrds. He made an effort to get the crowd to sing along.

"The loudest singer," Hillman said during the opening chords, "gets the Desert Rose recording contract, a trip to Nashville, an appearance on Nashville Now — the Lawrence Welk Show of the '90s — and the set of steak knives. Do we still have those?"

"See," he added as the music kicked into gear, "it's not all limousines up here."

Kidding aside, Hillman was highly complimentary toward his band, which includes banjoist-guitarist Herb Pedersen, guitarist John Jorgensen, pedal steel guitarist Jay Dee Maness, drummer Steve Duncan and bassist Bill Bryson.

"Seriously, this is the best band I have ever played with," he said.

He said the group enjoys performing live — "it's instant gratification" — but has scaled back its touring to spend more time at home in Los Angeles.

"It's too hard to be away like we've been," he said.

That road weariness wasn't reflected in the band's energy level Thursday. Even during a sound check at about 4:45 p.m., Hillman and Pedersen spent the bulk of their time strumming through tunes and practicing harmonies, and Hillman kept things lively with a string of wisecracks.

Pedersen, who writes the group's vocal arrangements, is something of a country music icon himself. Formerly a vocal arranger for Linda Ronstadt, he is widely regarded as one of the best banjo players and rhythm guitarists in the business, having performed with Jackson Browne, Johnny Rivers and Dan Fogelberg, among others.

It was during Fogelberg's 1985 acoustic "High Country Snows" tour, for which Hillman assembled a backing band, that the Desert Rose Band really got its start, Pedersen said.

Pedersen and Maness, who also has recorded with countless performers of all types of music, said the thing they like the most about their latest band is the chance to play on every song.

"We're two of the lead instruments, and we play a lot," Maness said. "This is like the ultimate country band for us."

Hillman, who in addition to his work with The Byrds has scored hits with groups including the Flying Burrito Brothers, Stephen Stills' Manassas and the Souther-Hillman-Furay band, said his goal in making music is always the same.

"A little acceptance, the same thing everyone's looking for," he said. "We make the music, and put it out there, and hope people like it and are kind when they talk about it."