

THE DESERT ROSE BAND

Chris Hillman and The Desert Rose Band have been igniting country music since they released their self-titled debut album in 1987. Taut, terse playing that's charged with electricity and tight three part harmonies have helped set apart the Southern California band, which is one of the few truly self-contained units playing country music.

And the difference shows. Since appearing on the scene in a cloud of smoke, The Desert Rose Band has notched five #1 singles ("Love Reunited," "He's Back and I'm Blue," "Summer Wind," "I Still Believe In You," and "She Don't Love Nobody"), racked up several Country Music Association and Academy of Country Music nominations, in addition to Hillman being cited by BMI for 21 years of excellence in songwriting.

Twenty-one years is a long time to maintain one's creativity in the ephemeral world of contemporary music — and it's that kind of longevity that Chris Hillman brings to the Desert Rose Band. Growing up in Southern California, Hillman cut his teeth on bluegrass music, playing on Cal Worthington's local country talent round-up on Channel 13 and later with Vern and Rex Gosdin and the Golden State Boys. That group eventually became the Hillmen, merging the traditional bluegrass of Flatt and Scruggs with more progressive material drawn from sources like Bob Dylan.

From there, Hillman went on to become one of the co-founders of the seminal folk-rock band, The Byrds, who gave the world such classics as "So You Want To Be A Rock and Roll Star," (which Hillman co-wrote and Tom Petty cut on his live album); "Turn, Turn Turn," "Eight Miles High," and the Dylan standard, "Mr. Tambourine Man." It was smooth sailing 'til a young Southerner named Gram Parsons joined the band and Hillman had someone else who shared his love of country music. Parsons' addition preceded the legendary *Sweetheart Of The Rodeo* album, which is credited with igniting the country-rock revolution and which *Rolling Stone* magazine cited as one of the all-time "100 Best Albums."

Hillman and Parsons soon left to form The Flying Burrito Brothers, whose *Gilded Palace of Sin* is another classic merging of country and rock music, marrying country's inherent heartbreak and twang with rock's inherent energy and intensity. Classics like "Sin City," which Dwight Yoakum and kd lang reprised as a duet in 1989, is part of the Smithsonian's Collection of Classic Country Music 1920-1975. "Wheels," "Christine's Tune (Devil In Disguise)" and "Hot Burrito #1 & #2" are also among the songs that came from their collaborations.

The die was cast for Chris Hillman, who further explored the country-rock axis with Stephen Stills' Manassas and the Souther-Hillman-Furay Band. But, it was the two acoustic records Hillman recorded for Sugarhill, "Morning Sky" and "Desert Rose," that convinced Hillman it was time to get back to his earliest roots.

So, he teamed up with Herb Pedersen, a friend from his teenage bluegrass years — and the man responsible for many of the vocals on Linda Ronstadt's classic country albums, in addition to doing the vocal arrangements for the Ronstadt-Emmylou Harris-Dolly Parton *Trio* sessions. Beyond that, Pedersen's session credits read like a Who's Who of pop music, ranging from James Taylor and Emmylou Harris, to Earl Scruggs, John Prine, Buck Owens and John Denver.

They were joined in their endeavor by another Southern Californian, John Jorgenson, an accomplished multi-instrumental whiz kid from Orange County, who was brought to Hillman's attention by bass player and former Bluegrass Cardinal Bill Bryson. The foursome toured acoustically as the opening act for Dan Fogelberg's much-heralded "High Country Snows" tour. And, it was Jorgenson's idea to take several of the songs Hillman was writing to an electric-band format.

And so it was that the 12-time Academy of Country Music Steel Player of the Year and former Buckaroo, Jay Dee Maness, and veteran drummer Steve Duncan, named ACM Drummer of the Year in '89, joined the Desert Rose Band, as they began re-fueling the country music fire.

With all that instrumental prowess, it's no wonder that response from country radio, fans and the press was immediate. These men came to the music honestly, yet their influences and experience reached beyond the obvious, allowing their combustion to be spontaneous instead of calculated.

Both *The Desert Rose Band* and *Running* were more aggressive albums than what was coming out of Nashville at the time of their release, and *Pages Of Life* is no different. The mix of textures and aesthetics takes the edge of rock guitar and applies it to the most traditional sounding country there is.

"'Story of Love'," as Hillman says, "is your basic 2/4 bluegrass. But then you take a song like 'In Another Lifetime' and you've got John Jorgenson playing guitar like Eric Clapton."

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If it sounds incongruous, remember that country music has always been the white man's blues and that songs of real life are what sets country apart. Certainly if there's an area where Hillman excels it's in writing songs that take the pulse of his contemporaries and the society in which we live.

"Start All Over Again," the first single and already a hit, sets the tone for *Pages of Life*, as it balances the notion of trying to reclaim one's own destiny in the face of perhaps insurmountable problems in a relationship. The same can be said for the plucky acoustic country of "Missing You." But then things get serious with "Darkness On The Playground," a song about the perils of drugs, peer pressure and neglect facing our nation's children, and "Everybody's Hero," which deals with the clay feet of the people who are often supposed to be setting the standard.

If it sounds potentially disillusioning and disheartening, that's not the case. These are songs of options, consideration and hope in the face of it all. As Hillman explains, "Writing these kinds of songs is never intentional. If you sit down to write a song about one of these subjects, it becomes contrived. So, I just try to write about what's on my mind and hope that it reflects what other people are thinking, too."

Given that Hillman has always avoided the glass-dome world of most pop stars, his point of view is startlingly accurate. But, that's because he's in step with the rest of society — and that's something he and the rest of the Desert Rose Band are extremely proud of.

"What is it?" Hillman says of the band. "'Start All Over' is the result of three years of evolving; it's where we've come to and I think it's a real solid unit. We're a real good band that plays together. We have songs of substance that are played real well — and we have a passion for this music, which you can hear."

"Where we go from here is just a matter of a continuing evolution. As long as we can maintain our parameters; keep making music that matters and continue growing, it'll be fine."