

Chris Hillman album marks return to bluegrass style

By ARTHUR MENIUS

What do an Eagle, a Byrd, three Flying Burrito Brothers, a former Dillard, and Elvis Presley's guitarist, bass man, pianist, and drummer have in common? They all perform on veteran musician Chris Hillman's new album, *Desert Rose*, released in June on the Sugar Hill label.

"This new album is just Herb Pederson and I singing duets a la the old brother duets," Chris, a San Diego resident, said while in Maggie Valley, N.C. to tape a segment of the Linear Group's *Fire on the Mountain* show for the Nashville Network. "We actually did a Louvin Brothers' song called 'I Can't Keep You in Love With Me,' and we did 'Somebody's Back in Town,' a Wilburn Brothers song.

"It's electric. Al Perkins produced it, and I used Herb Pederson and Bernie Leadon, Al, of course, and Jerry Scheff on the bass and Ronny Tutt on the drums. Both Jerry and Ronny were with Elvis. And I had James Burton play guitar." Also appearing on various songs are fiddler Bryon Berline, pianist Glen D. Hardin, and pedal steel man Jay Dee Maness. "They are the professional session guys that really know how to play," Chris concluded proudly.

Desert Rose contains two original Hillman songs, "Running the Roadblocks," and the title track. The latter cut shows that despite years of stardom with the Byrds, the original Flying Burrito Brothers, Manassas, and the Souther-Hillman-Furay Band Chris has not lost touch with the real people who buy his records.

"I picked up a paper last year and I was reading about how people from Detroit and everywhere had to leave their families and go look for work. Like go down to Houston to get a job and then bring their families. So I wrote this song about the mills have all shut down in our

town. I've got to get another job. Will you still love me when I'm gone?

"It's tough, and sometimes we don't know how lucky we are. When an industry starts to fold that people have been involved in for thirty years or two generations of their family, what do they do?"

The eight covers on *Desert Rose* draw on such solid country sources as George Jones, Mickey Newbury, Reno and Smiley, and Jimmie Rodgers.

"I'm not as concerned about writing and having all my own songs as I used to be," Chris noted. "I tend to look for a good song, and if I don't write it, somebody else out there has.... I'll take it and sort of put it in a Chris Hillman style. That has certainly paid off for Ricky Skaggs. He has a wonderful talent for finding good material that fits him."

Chris entered the music business through bluegrass and country in his native southern California almost a quarter century ago. In October 1964, however, he joined a new group called the Byrds. When their version of Bob Dylan's "Hey Mr. Tambourine Man" hit the top of the pop charts the next spring, Hillman was on the way to a career that saw him pioneer both 60s folk rock and the country rock sound that dominated the 70s.

After seventeen years of fame and public acclaim Chris "was just sick and tired of rock 'n' roll. I took a year off in 1981. I just wanted to sit back and gather my wits about me, because I'd been going since '63."

About that time, Barry Poss, president of Sugar Hill, the label on which Ricky Skaggs perfected his chart topping style, issued an album of 1963 recordings by the Hillmen. That bluegrass group consisted of Chris, Vern Gosdin, and Don Parmenter, now leader of the Bluegrass Cardinals.

"When I was talking to Barry on the phone," Chris recalled, "I said,

'Gee, I'd love to do an acoustic album,' and he said, 'When do you want to start?'"

That resulted in *Morning Sky*, Chris' critically praised 1982 bluegrass and acoustic country long player. It brought Leadon, Perkins, and Pederson together with Chris. They recruited Scheff for a tour of northern California. That trip started Chris on the rounds of clubs and bluegrass festivals. He usually works as a duo with Perkins, but when ever Leadon and Scheff are available they form a four piece. "Herb's the invisible member. Whenever he's around, he sits in."

The change in direction forced Chris to work hard on his mandolin picking. "I lost about 50% of my technique. I'm just getting it back. I was real stupid. I didn't even own one from '65 til '70."

Chris' return to country coincides with his personal maturation. "You get older, you get more conservative. The 60s were exciting. A lot of good things happened as a result of that protesting, but there's a lot of things about the breaking of barriers in the 60s that I don't like. Now that I'm older I can see how wrong that is. Like the break up of the family. That's a real foundation, another Biblical thing. You break up the family, and a lot of dissension and negativity come in. That doesn't mean that just because you're approaching 40 you can't believe in a good morality in this country."

What I can't believe is that the youthful looking mandolinist and guitarist is nearing forty. His rediscovery of country music and more intimate venues has left him relaxed and healthy. "I'm having more fun now than I ever had in the rock 'n' roll end of it... I love the little labels like Sugar Hill and Rounder, I love the clubs, and I love acoustic music, because it's human, and it's music for people, something for our generation."