# Chris Hillman

## Everybody's Favorite Second In Command Goes Back To Square One

by William Ruhlmann

Chris Hillman has been very helpful. As his interviewer has probed back into a career that stretches to the 45-year-old musician's high school days, he has gamely answered questions. Finally, however, when trying to call up a detail about a recording from 25 years ago, he stops with a sigh in mid-sentence. "I don't remember," he finally says. "You know how many bands I've been in?"

Quite a few. Now the leader of the Desert Rose Band, one of the most successful country acts of the past four years, Chris Hillman has spent most of his adult life in one band or another, gradually working his way up and learning his way around the music business to reach his current level of success. He's been a sideman and a group member, part of trios and duos and even taken a few solo excursions. Through it all, he has continued to make his mark as an instrumentalist, a songwriter and a singer. Some times have been rough, but today he says he's happier than he's ever been.

Hillman was born in Los Angeles on December 4, 1944 (the date is often given as 1942), and raised in San Diego County. He took up the guitar before his teens, and had turned to bluegrass and the mandolin by the end of the 1950s. He was playing professionally by his senior year in high school, and just after graduating recorded his first album, *Bluegrass Favorites*, with his band the Scottsville Squirrel Barkers.

"That was made in 1963 in Los Angeles," he recalls, "and we went in and did that in about four hours, the entire album, live, just set up and played. It actually isn't bad. That was on Crown Records. They used B-grade vinyl. (The records) were probably only good for about 100, 200 plays, and then they disintegrated. It really was basically for supermarket outlets and five-and-dime stores, and they were like a dollar for an album. They let you have an album cover, a picture, but that was about it. And it wasn't any royalties, so to speak; we got as many records as we wanted to sell on our own. You couldn't cut any original tunes on there, as they wouldn't give a royalty. It was really, at that particular time, an album that one would do to get work. Similar to the record business now, you go gold or platinum, and basically you're promoting yourself through live performances."

The Squirrel Barkers got work in country bars around California. Hillman was invited to join a more prestigious group, the Golden State Boys, which metamorphosed into the Blue Diamond Boys, and finally, the Hillmen.

The Hillmen turned up at World Pacific Studios trying to impress Jim Dickson, who had recorded the Dillards, and in turn Elektra Records, the Dillards' label. Dickson recorded them, though the tapes were not issued at the time. In 1969, *The Hillmen* came out on Together Records though, and the album was subsequently reissued by Sugar Hill Records.

"The material is good," Hillman says today. "The best part of it was Vern and Rex Gosdin's singing. They were singing great. There's a few cuts that were really quite outstanding."

While at World Pacific in 1964, Hillman was recruited to join the Jet Set, soon to become the Beefeaters and then the Byrds. He switched from mandolin to bass guitar. What followed was a period of more than four years when Hillman gradually moved up from a sideman who wasn't even included on the group's Columbia Records contract to co-leadership of the band with Roger McGuinn. By October 1968, however, Hillman had had enough.

After a brief retirement, he hooked up with Gram Parsons, who had also quit the Byrds in 1968, to continue the experiment with country music begun with the Byrds' *Sweetheart Of The Rodeo* album. Returning to guitar and mandolin, and with Parsons on guitar, Hillman was joined by bassist Chris Ethridge, steel guitarist Sneaky Pete Kleinow, and drummer Jon Corneal to form the Flying Burrito Brothers.

The Burritos signed to A&M, but Corneal departed during the album sessions, forcing them to employ three other drummers to complete the session. In February, former Byrd Michael Clarke joined the band.

The debut album, *The Gilded Palace Of Sin*, was released in April 1969, with a cover depicting Ethridge, Kleinow, Parsons and Hillman in elaborate Nudie's suits. Unabashedly country in sound, it also contained drug and anti-war references that made it unlikely it would succeed in the country market. The LP entered the *Billboard* pop chart for the week ending May 3, and peaked at #164 during a seven-week run.

"'Sin City' obviously was a good country song because Emmylou (Harris) cut it and Dwight Yoakam cut it," Hillman says of one of the LP's more memorable cuts. "Now, that doesn't necessarily mean anything, but to me it was. I think that that first Burrito album, there's some great songs on there. Technically, it wasn't the

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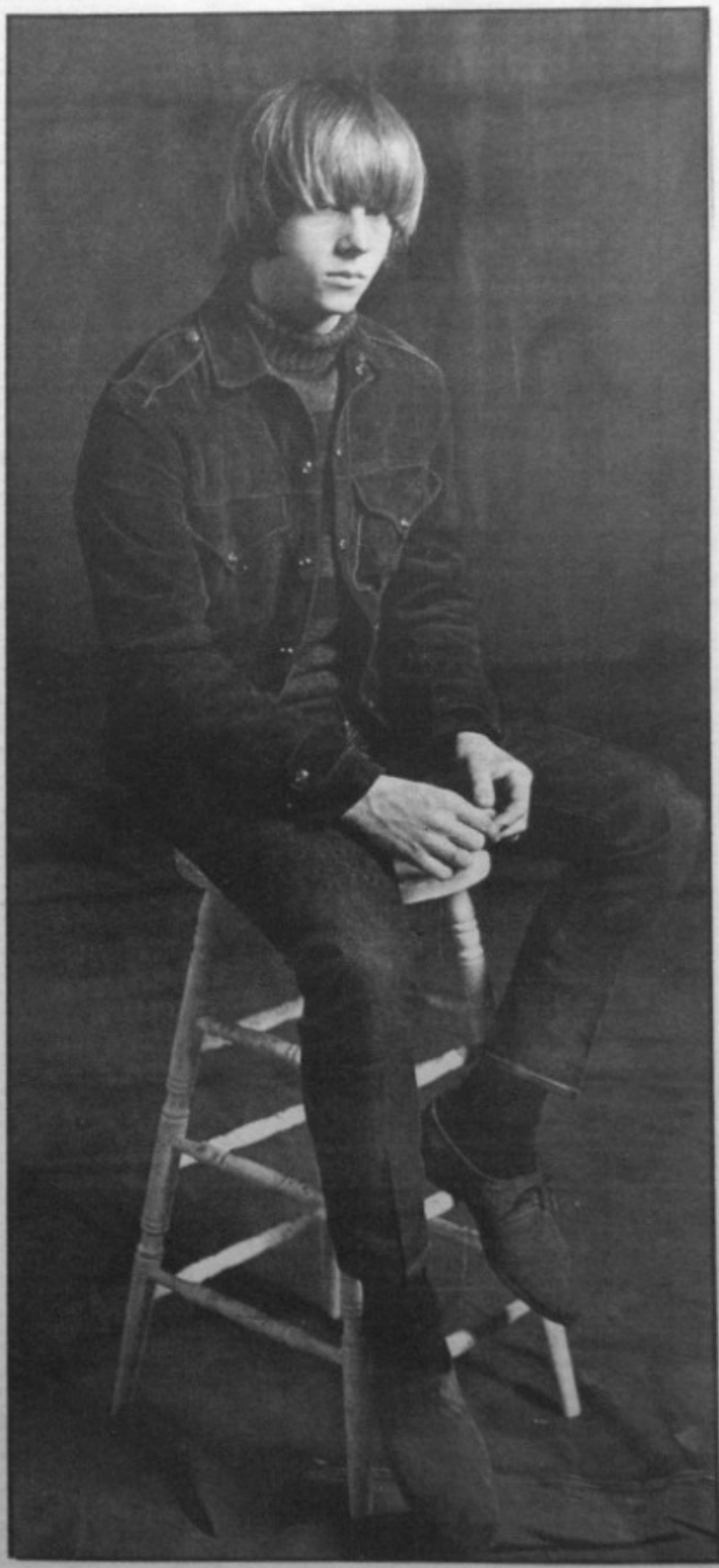

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best recording. It was very soulful. Certainly, it showcased Gram Parsons better than anything else on record, him singing 'Hot Burrito #1' and ('#2.') He sang probably better on those two cuts than anything else he ever did. And the songs, 'Wheels' and 'Sin City,' that's the kind of thing every songwriter wants to be a part of, a piece of material that stands up 20 years later and is looked upon with respect.

"And then the oddity of all times was, we would take R&B material and do it country. 'Dark End Of The Street' and 'Do Right Woman,' I mean, my God, how could you touch a piece of music like 'Do Right Woman'? But we pulled it off, it worked. But that was Gram. Gram had that great vision. He really had an interesting . . .*brain!* He had an interesting outlook on things like that. He was a very funny, very tongue-in-cheek guy in those days, very sharp wit."

But the album's lack of success contributed to the instability of the band's personnel. Ethridge left the Burritos in September. Hillman switched to bass, with Bernie Leadon joining on guitar and dobro. This quintet recorded *Burrito Deluxe*, released in April 1970. The material was thinner this time, with more covers, including the first appearance of Mick Jagger and Keith Richards' "Wild Horses" (reflecting Parsons' friendship with Richards). The LP failed to reach the charts.

As it was being released, the Burritos suffered the loss of Parsons, who went solo. They replaced him with Rick Roberts. "I don't think Rick Roberts was the right guy to put into the Burritos," Hillman says, "although Rick is very talented and a very good songwriter, as was proven later in Firefall. He's very commercial. But in hindsight it wasn't the right thing to do. But it doesn't really matter, it's water under the bridge."

Roberts had a strong hand in the third album, *The Flying Burrito Brothers*, contributing such songs as "Colorado," which would later turn up on Linda Ronstadt's breakthrough *Don't Cry Now* album. But the album was only a slight improvement in chart terms. It entered the charts on June 12, 1971, peaking at #176 in the course of the nine weeks.

It was still in the charts when Leadon and Kleinow quit the band in July. They were replaced by Kenny Wertz (guitar) and Al Perkins (steel), while Byron Berline (violin) and Roger Bush (bass) also were featured with the band onstage.

It was this lineup that recorded the final Burritos album, a live set called *Last Of The Red Hot Burritos*, before the group finally broke up in October 1971. The bandmembers were, Hillman says, "victims of our own excess.

Hillman with the Byrds in 1965. Clockwise from top left; Jim McGuinn, Gene Clark, Hillman, Michael Clarke and David Crosby

"The Burritos, I had felt, I had taken as far as I could. But the Burritos did have one thing, they had become a really good stage band. That was what we had accomplished. I take credit for that. I turned that thing into a real efficient, entertaining live band, which can be heard on that live Flying Burrito Brothers album. That's a good album. It's exciting. It's got a lot of excitement in it." (The album wasn't released until May 1972, and when it was, performed at about the same sales level as its three predecessors, peaking at #171 during a seven-week chart run.)

As the Burritos broke up, Hillman connected with Stephen Stills, who was looking to put a band together after recording two solo albums in the wake of the breakup of Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young. Hillman brought along Al Perkins. The result was a band called "Stephen Stills Manassas."

"At the time when I ran across Stephen again when he was playing solo, it was a big relief, and I was honored that he asked me," Hillman says. "It was stimulating. I needed to be stimulated at that time, I had stuck with the Burritos for two or three years. I desperately needed somebody to keep me on my toes, and Stills was the guy, and here I was involoved with Al Perkins into this band of players that were top-notch. I don't think I'd ever played with anybody was good as these guys, from Dallas Taylor to Joe Lala. All these guys were such good players. It was just what the doctor ordered.

"And then Stephen, to this day I will defend him to anybody. I think he's one of the most gifted writer/singer/players around, and he's unique, and what I've always based good artistic endeavors on are uniqueness and your own style. That's all we can ever strive to do, is to create our own style. He certainly has done that, and he's had his ups and downs, but that man has carried CSN for a long, long time. No slur against the other two guys, they're wonderful players and singers and writers. But Stephen's got that thing, when he's on, boy, he's real powerful. So that was a real stimulation."

The Manassas double album was released in April 1972, and soared to #4 in the charts. But the group did not enjoy much support from Atlantic Records, which still wanted a reformation of CSN&Y, and Manassas only managed to finish one more album, *Down The Road*, before dissolving.

"Manassas fell apart over this second album we were doing," Hillman says. "The songs were falling apart. The material wasn't good. The initial thrust of the band had just lost all of its power, and I think Stephen at that time was probably like me in the Burritos; he probably needed to jump back into something that was going to challenge him a little more.

"The first record we did was real good, and we were good onstage. It was a wonderful band. I always look back on that with fond memories. That band could play anything from a salsa piece to a very straight bluegrass song, and anything in between. I learned a lot about different types of music that I had not been familiar with."

Hillman participated in the 1973 Byrds reunion album, but his next project was a new supergroup being put together by Asylum Records president David Geffen. Geffen wanted Poco member Richie Furay, songwriter J.D. Souther and Hillman to form a CSN-like trio.

"That's once again something that looked wonderful on paper, but in actual performance delivery it just didn't have it, and we never quite jelled," Hillman says. "We never interacted with each other as writers or singers. It was like three guys bumbling along and trying to do solo stuff and put into this conflguration where we still remained solo artists. I don't really think of that one too much.

"I love Richie very much. I think he's a wonderful man and a sweet guy, and he's done a lot of good music. And of course, Souther, I can't say enough about his songwriting. He's a fabulous songwriter. He's probably one of the best songwriters in the country right now, always has been. Looking back, it was almost like killing time. It was like waiting. It was like something to do before something else came along. But I think there's a couple of times we played live that we were pretty good. Second album was horrible. First album wasn't bad; it wan't great, but it wasn't bad. But the second album we did wasn't too good. Not one of my greater endeavors."

The Souther-Hillman-Furay Band's debut album, released in the summer of 1974, got to #11, while its follow-up, the aptly titled *Trouble In Paradise*, reached #39 the following year. "We got a gold album for the first one," Hillman notes, "but they probaly got so many returns that the joke was, they're all in Geffen's basement."

But though SHF was no more (and David Geffen was on hiatus from the record industry), the individual members of the group were still contracted to Asylum Records. "I had an existing deal wih Asylum, as did Furay and Souther, and I think each of us made a few albums for them," Hillman says. "Joe Smith came in and took over Asylum—he's a sweet guy, probably one of the nicer men in the record business — and honored our contracts."

Hillman released his first solo album, *Slippin' Away*, in the spring of 1976, and a second, *Clear Sailin'*, a year later. Both grazed the bottom of the charts. "The first one was interesting," he says. "It wasn't a bad record, actually. There were some good songs on there, as I look back. I wasn't really ready to be a solo artist then. I don't think any of us were—I'm talking about Richie and J.D., having come out of the last nightmare. Probably Souther more so than Richie and I, but what Souther lacked, we knew how to do. Souther wasn't a great performer on stage at the time.

"But it never worked for any of us. It was just part of the learning process, part of the stepping stones, I think. Looking back on it, I say, 'Well, okay, I did that.' I really didn't know how to sing good enough. I liked the songs, but I really wasn't in command, and I was under other excesses that

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almost killed me at that period. I don't look back fondly on the '70s as a decade. It wasn't my greatest time to be alive. I got through it and learned a hell of a lot."

There were more lessons still to come. In May 1977, Hillman undertook a European tour as a solo artist in a package that also included Roger McGuinn and Gene Clark. In the following year, McGuinn and Clark often appeared together, with Hillman sometimes participating, a relationship that was formalized in early 1979 with the release of *McGuinn, Clark & Hillman*. The LP went to #39 and spawned a hit single in "Don't You Write Her Off." Much less successful was a 1980 follow-up, *City*, and later in the year, a final LP dropped Clark. *McGuinn-Hillman* failed to chart.

Hillman must be prompted to remember this configuration. "I went from those solo records back to McGuinn, Clark ad Hillman. Oops! Almost forgot about that one!" he says with a laugh. "That was a situation where Roger and Gene had been working and shopping deals, and I had finished doing this *Clear Sailin'* album, and somehow we had hooked up as a trio. I think they got a deal with Capitol and then they added me onto the deal. I just got added at the eleventh hour, thank God. That's why I don't remember. (It) was a very lucrative deal, calling for six albums with escalating money—a lot of money.

"And initially, the first record wasn't bad. It was sort of not what you'd expect from McGuinn or Hillman or Gene Clark. It was a very slick album, but it wasn't bad. There were some interesting songs on there. Then Gene started to go nuts again, so the second album, we were trying to keep him in line, like, 'Come on, Gene, don't do this. You're getting crazy again,' and we tried to do this second album and it was horrible, couldn't even get him to sing.

"So by the time the third album came along, we didn't know what we were doing. We'd go down and work with Jerry Wexler and Barry Beckett. Well, they're *great* producers. Barry Beckett's a wonderful producer. Wexler, of course, was R&B. But looking back, Jerry was trying to turn us into Sam and Dave or something. It was so out of context. He didn't know who the hell we were. Jerry's frame of reference extended from Percy Sledge to Aretha Franklin. We don't fit in there! That's like getting Wilson Pickett to do the best of the Byrds. Jerry was trying to turn us into *Negroes*. It didn't work. We're two white kids. If there's anybody that's the definition of middle-class white kids, it's McGuinn and I. It's not like we're coming from the poor side of town and we have all this R&B influence.

"So that's an embarrassing album, that last McGuinn-Hillman album. That one ranks up there with the Byrds reunion album. You've got to sort of use them for skeet shooting because they're really not good, and I do advise every collector, don't waste your time. *Maybe* you'll like some of it, it's just not something I'm proud of."

The failed grouping with McGuinn and Clark plunged Hillman into another period of self-examination. In '81 I took a year off and was figuring out if I needed to change careers, because I really wasn't a viable commodity at that time in the business," Hillman says, "and I got an offer from Barry Poss, who runs Sugar Hill. He had bought the Hillmen masters, and I had talked to him on the phone in North Carolina, and I said, 'God, I'd love to make a bluegrass album some day.' He said, 'Well, when do you want to do one?' So I did it, and I have no regrets."

In fact, he did two albums, *Morning Sky* in 1982 and *Desert Rose* in 1984. "Those two albums are far better, outshine anything I'd ever done to that point, solo," he says. "And the budgets we had! I had a $5,000 or $6,000 budget on the first one and a $9,000 budget on the second one. But it worked. And I went out, and I was playing acoustic. I was using Al Perkins on dobro; I was playing as a duo. I played folk festivals in Canada and a lot of bluegrass festivals."


The path Hillman took, with the reduced budgets and limited distribution of an independent label, is one many of his contemporaries who previously enjoyed major label success have resisted (one of the holdouts being McGuinn, who stayed away from recording for 10 years until signing to Arista in 1990).

"I'll tell anybody who's been on a major who's been dropped, if you can't get anything going, there's nothing wrong with being on an independent label," says Hillman. "It keeps the creative juices flowing. It's more helpful, of course, if you have that acoustic background. Thank God I came out of that initially, that I could go and do that. But it was the greatest learning experience I ever had in my ife, going out for 1982 ad '83 and playing acoustically in folk clubs. I went back to square one and I re-learned everything, and it really helped me. It set me up for Desert Rose Band."

The new band came about unintentionally, according to Hillman. "I never had any intention of going into an electric band again," he says. "It just happened by accident. I had written all these tunes after the second Sugar Hill album, and then John Jorgenson was working with me, and he said, 'We ought to try using a drummer and a steel player,' and all of a sudden it just fell together, where, bang, we got on a label and we got some success."

Despite the fortuitous nature of the project, Hillman also sees his move into mainstream country music as a logical development in his career. "It took me years to figure out what I do the best," he says. "This is where I came from. This is (what) I cut my teeth on, is playing mandolin with Vern Gosdin. Vern Godin was my window on authenticity. He came right out of Alabama. I was a middle-class white kid from Southern California who used to surf. When I got into the Byrds, I went, 'What is this? What is Beatles? What is rock 'n' roll?' I had come from working in country bars in California. This is why it was comfortable, and I think everything that you could trace back to my involvement in the Byrds was that was the element that I brought in, my weird bass playing and my sense of vocal arrangements or songwriting."

At the same time, Hillman finally felt ready to lead a band, after years of supporting others or working as a solo act. When asked if it's fair to say that he's always felt more comfortable in groups, Hillman readily agrees.

"Very fair to say," he says, "and at the time I'm sure I was a very stable factor to other lunatics that I worked with. "I was everybody's favorite second in command. Stephen's, Manassas, Gram, to some degree, and Roger, and those were the three bands where I was a good second guy to have. I kept the guys stable, I kept the music going, I had some good ideas. I was a good catalyst for everybody to work off of. And then I sort of took my time and learned who I was and got familiar with what I did the best, and of course, here we are in Desert Rose where it's really my band and it feels great. Not to the point where I'm some maniac dictator, but it is my baby, and it really worked out great. I've got these wonderful players.

"I've always said that the Desert Rose Band is a highly evolved Burrito Brothers. It's everything that I was trying to learn 20 years ago that I learned in the interim 20 years, to where I stepped out and said, 'Okay, now I'm going to be the king. I'm going to be the front guy now. I know how to do this. I've been an apprentice for a few years.'


"And I don't mean that in a demeaning way. I made Gram Parsons sound good, and I made Stephen sound good, and I hope I made Roger sound good, and that's all I could ask for. And even to this day, David Crosby looks me in the eye two months ago (at the Byrds recording session in Nashville in August 1990), and he says, 'You know, it's neat, when we're in the Byrds, we're really making Roger sound good. We're secondary players.' I said 'You're absolutely right. When we play in the Byrds, right now, *the* Byrds, that's our role. We're character actors and Roger's the leading man.' That's fine. It makes the music sound good. Everybody cannot be the king of the mountain. It won't work that way, that's how bands explode. We all have a certain piece of the pie that we have to be accountable for."


Even Hillman was surprised at the immediate acceptance enjoyed by the Desert Rose Band, which was signed to MCA/Curb and issued its first single, "Ashes Of Love," in March 1987. The single reached #28 in the country charts, and the next six Desert Rose Band singles all hit the Top 10, with "He's Black And I'm Blue" and "I Still Believe In You" both going all the way to #1.

"It's very amazing," Hillman says of the success. "When the first Desert Rose stuff started coming out, I had no idea that it would be accepted that readily, and one thing in our career or our situation in Desert Rose, the radio has been wonderful with us. We have been very lucky. We've had such a wonderful track record. If it ended tomorrow, I'd know we'd accomplished something, we really did something, and I'm proud of the body of work we did."

Desert Rose has issued three albums to date: its debut, which appeared in June 1987, *Running* (whose autobiographical title track, dealing with the suicide of Hillman's father, may be his best song ever) in September 1988, and *Pages Of Life*, in February 1990. After touring extensively during the year Hillman is ready to take some time to recharge.

"I'm taking from December (1990) to June (1991) off," he says. "I don't want to go on the road. I have to learn some new tricks. It's true. I want to think about what I'm doing and step out of the arena for a while, and before I walk in and do another studio album with Desert Rose, I want to really have the time and not be under any kind of pressure to deliver. I want to be able to deliver something that is challenging to me, and hopefully it'll be still acceptable to the rigid country format."

And Hillman offers more than a hint that, during that lay-off, he'd be available for a new Byrds studio album or tour. If so, he can be expected to provide his usual excellent support. If not, we can look forward to more high-quality country music, probably toward the end of 1991.