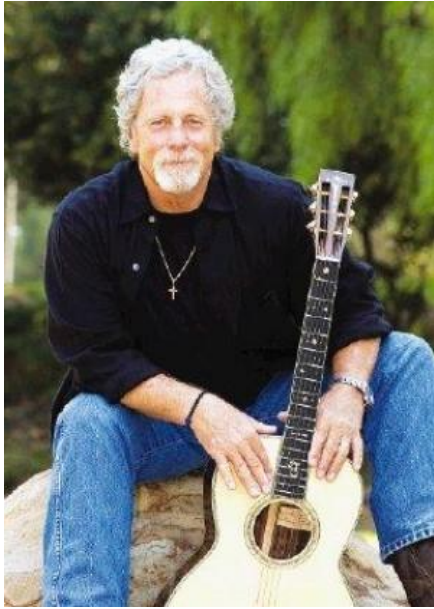


Ex-Byrd Chris Hillman takes flight



By Peter Jones

The more things change, the more they stay the same for Chris Hillman.

The musician began his artistic journey as a straight-ahead bluegrass picker before inventing folk-rock, popularizing country-rock, experimenting with raga and psychedelic, playing mainstream Top 40 country, singing in a Greek Orthodox choir and returning to his acoustic roots more than 40 years after staking out his original claim as a hootenanny fixture.

The progression of Hillman's history involves nearly a dozen bands and represents a half-century odyssey—he is an artist who once played second fiddle to the likes of Vern Gosdin, Roger McGuinn, David Crosby, Gram Parsons and Stephen Stills. Only later did Hillman take flight as a full-fledged singer-songwriter.

“What’s changed over the years is that I’ve learned how to do it better,” the Byrds founder said. “I didn’t really have a handle on singing until the late ’70s or early ’80s. I was shy. I don’t like to go back and look over my shoulder, but one regret in my life is I should have had more confidence — because I find now at age 64 that singing is by far one of the more pleasurable things I do in music.”

Hillman will perform a cross-section

of his history with longtime cohort Herb Pedersen Jan. 30 at the Colfax Events Center in Denver. The show will be an exercise in random shots through one of the longest and most diverse discographies in rock music history.

"I always put the set list on stage and I sort of glance at it, but I never follow it," Hillman said. "It makes Herb crazy. I feel like Peyton Manning who changes the play midstream."

That same kind of same organic anarchy helped forge the early career of "the only authentic cowboy to ever be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame," a proposition stated boldly on Hillman's personal website.

Raised on his family's ranch home in rural San Diego County, Hillman rode horses, obediently performed his chores and immersed himself in folk and country music for much of his childhood. By age 14, he had fallen in love with the mandolin and had begun playing in various groups on the southern California bluegrass scene — most notably, the Hillmen [whose name was coincidental to Hillman himself] and the Golden State Boys, featuring Vern Godin.

Like the other original Byrds, Hillman had no rock and roll experience when the five frustrated folkies united in common cause after growing bored with the folk scene and watching in awe as the Beatles debuted on "The Ed Sullivan Show" in 1964.

In an odd juxtaposition, the early Byrds' sound was built around Beatlesque harmonies and Roger McGuinn's electric 12-string guitar, a variation on the acoustic 12-string that he had used while accompanying the Chad Mitchell Trio and the Limelites in New York City.

By process of elimination, bluegrass mandolinist Hillman was asked to learn the bass guitar, an entirely foreign instrument to the 20-year-old bluegrass kid from rural California.

"We had no blueprint," Hillman said of the Byrds' newfangled folk-rock hybrid. "It scared me to death. Rock bands really had to put a show on. You had to be connected to the audience. In bluegrass, it was all stone-faced because you have so much to think about — the next solo, the high tenor part. It's fast and it's improvisational. But in rock and roll, you've got to look good."

For the next several years, the Byrds piloted the '60s folk-rock boom and reached full throttle with electric jingly-jangly takes on Bob Dylan's "Mr. Tambourine Man" and Pete Seeger's "Turn, Turn, Turn." The band later expanded its horizons into Indian raga rock and the John Coltrane-influenced "Eight Miles High."

For those early flights, Hillman was mostly passenger to McGuinn, David Crosby and Gene Clark, the trio that populated the Byrds creative cockpit at the time, though as the band moved in a country-rock direction, Hillman's bluegrass credentials began to come in handy.

As the Byrds' first lineup disintegrated [Crosby flew the coop to join Crosby, Stills & Nash], Gram Parsons joined the Byrds in 1968 just in time to record the classic "Sweetheart of the Rodeo," a highly influential album that would define the country-rock movement.

After finishing "Sweetheart," Hillman and Parsons jumped ship to form the Flying Burrito Brothers, a band founded in full dedication to taking country music to new altitudes.

"It was really just country music," Hillman said in retrospect. "The first Burritos album really could have been recorded by George Jones or somebody else in Nashville. That was not country-rock. That was country music."

Despite a dream team of neo-honky tonk rebels, Hillman and Parsons got itchy feet and eventually left the Burritos to pursue separate ambitions. Parsons favored lifestyle choices over music and became a cult figure after dying at age 26 under mysterious circumstances.

Hillman was deeply saddened by Parsons' death, though he says it was not entirely unexpected. Thirty-five years later, he remembers Parsons fondly, but views his friend's life and career as a tragically missed opportunity.

"He was a wonderfully creative guy, a funny guy," Hillman said. "We were like brothers. We were after the same goal. But then we lost him. I couldn't work with him anymore. He let us all down. He could have been Dwight Yoakam if he had the right work ethic and professionalism."

In the early '70s, Hillman quietly became an evangelical Christian, albeit a soft-spoken one. He also began a decade of brief stints with various bands that included Stephen Stills' Manassas, the Souther-Hillman-Furay Band [with singer-songwriter J.D. Souther and Poco's Richie Furay] and two quasi-Byrds reunions—a one-off record by the original lineup and three albums credited to McGuinn, Clark & Hillman.

The ex-Byrd/Burrito would not find another long-term musical home until the early 1980s, when he formed the Desert Rose Band with old friend Herb Pedersen, a former member of the Dillards, who as a session ace had accompanied the likes of Kris Kristofferson, Linda Ronstadt and James Taylor, among a host of hundreds.

Although Desert Rose saw inevitable fan carryover from Hillman and Pedersen's previous groups, its broad success on the country charts happened mostly independent of previous associations.

"People accepted us for what we did, not on the basis of past track record," Hillman said.

“We would get these really hardcore country fans and a lot of them weren’t aware that I had been in the Byrds. That’s where I felt we had really gained the respect of the country music community.”

Although the band broke up in the early '90s, Hillman and Pedersen continued to collaborate on projects, including the current acoustic tour.

“Herb is one of the great musicians who make all of us sound better,” Hillman said.

“He’s a phenomenal singer and a wonderful guitar player.”

Playing and singing with Pedersen in acoustic performances has been one of Hillman’s great musical joys after decades of musical and personal changes.

“The acoustic approach and the intimacy of a small room is really what I like now after all these years because I can really draw from the well,” Hillman said. “Here was this shy guy in the Byrds who was in the back row playing bass, and now Herb has to shut me up on stage because I keep talking about a song, where it comes from and why it was written.”

