

Ex-Byrd Chris Hillman reflects on 50-year 'flyte'

By **Peter Jones** - October 16, 2020



Chris Hillman has played in more than a half dozen bands since the early 1960s, from the Byrds to the Desert Rose band. Courtesy of Chris Hillman

[Subscribe to this Author](#)

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

The musician began his journey as a straight-ahead bluegrass player before virtually co-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.

Along the path of his full circle, Hillman remained a wide-eyed music student.

"I've never stopped learning something new. That sounds kind of corny," he said. "Right now, I'm learning some real strange jazz chords. Will I use them on stage? I doubt it, but it's a challenge."

The progression of Hillman's history involves nearly a dozen bands and represents more than a half-century odyssey in musical and personal growth for an artist who has 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 that singing is by far one of the more pleasurable things I do in music."

Today, the singer stands as the only authentic cowboy to ever be inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, or at least that is a proposition as stated boldly on Hillman's personal website.

His 2020 autobiography is titled *Time Between: My Life as a Byrd, Burrito Brother and Beyond*.

A country boy in California

Raised on his family's ranch home in rural San Diego County, Hillman rode horses, 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 future country star Vern Gosdin.

Like the other original Byrds, Hillman had zilch in the way of 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 resulting 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 [Limelickers](#) in New York City's Greenwich Village. Gene Clark had been a member of the clean-scrubbed New Christy Minstrels.

With few other options, 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. "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. You've got to smile."

Folk-rock takes off

For the next several years, the Byrds piloted the burgeoning '60's 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 the early Byrds flights, Hillman was mostly passenger to McGuinn, Clark and David Crosby, 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 started to come in handy.

"I had such great singers to learn from," he said. "I think shyness held me back. We had progressed so rapidly as a band, from barely being able to play our electric instruments."

As the Byrds' first line-up disintegrated (the fired Crosby flew the coop and soon co-founded 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 usher in the country-rock movement.

"IT SCARED ME TO DEATH. ROCK BANDS REALLY HAD TO PUT A SHOW ON."

-CHRIS HILLMAN

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."

The death of Gram Parsons

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. Decades later, Hillman 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," he said. "We were best friends. 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 a Christian, albeit a soft-spoken one. About the same time, he began a decade of brief stints with various groups 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 line-up and three albums credited to [McGuinn, Clark & Hillman](#).

Starting again with the Desert Rose Band

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 bluegrass band, who as a session ace had accompanied the likes of Kris Kristofferson, Linda Ronstadt and James Taylor, among a host of hundreds.

"HE WAS A WONDERFULLY CREATIVE GUY ... WE WERE BEST FRIENDS. WE WERE LIKE BROTHERS. ... BUT THEN WE LOST HIM. I COULDN'T WORK WITH HIM ANYMORE."

-CHRIS HILLMAN ON GRAM PARSONS

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 past 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 touring as an acoustic duo.

"Herb is one of the great musicians who make all of us sound better," Hillman said. "He's a phenomenal singer, a wonderful guitar player. I always put the set list on stage and I sort of glance at it, but I never follow it. It makes Herb crazy. I feel like Peyton Manning who changes the play midstream."

Hillman and Pedersen have occasionally reunited the full Desert Rose Band, albeit on a temporary, as-needed basis.

"We're not reforming as a career move," Hillman said. "It's a part of history, but it's a part of history that we revisit occasionally. It's the first band I left where everybody is still friends. So when there's an offer and everybody's available, we look and see if we can do it. To me, we sound better now than in our heyday. We're not under the gun to deliver anything for radio. It's a different world now."

The end of the Byrds

The same congeniality cannot be said of the Byrds, a band long known for its infighting and history of membership changes. [Although Hillman and McGuinn eventually toured together with Marty Stuart to mark the 50th anniversary of *Sweetheart of the Rodeo*](#), Hillman does not think the Byrds as such should fly again.

"I've loved playing the songs and [Crosby] wanted to do it, but [McGuinn] was right," Hillman said. "We couldn't have brought it back."

Playing with Pedersen, however, especially in acoustic performances, has been one of Hillman's greatest 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."

Peter Jones

<http://allpurposecommunicator.com>

Peter Jones is an award-winning journalist and broadcaster. He has reported for Billboard, National Public Radio, America Online and The Christian Science Monitor, among others. In Colorado, Peter's work has appeared in 5280, The Colorado Statesman, and on Colorado Public Radio. He has also been a radio talk show host, most memorably for the controversial "Prove It!," where he delved playfully into the world of unproven claims and attracted a degree of international attention. For more information about

Peter Jones, visit www.allpurposecommunicator.com.

