

BIOGRAPHY: DOUG SAHM

THE ORIGINAL COSMIC COWBOY

Doug Sahm was a wildly versatile artist best known for his pop-rock music, but for a time in the 1970s in Austin, he became the role model for a group of renegade country artists that included Willie Nelson.

“Doug was the organizer of what blew up into the Austin music scene,” said Joe Nick Patoski, who directed a 2015 documentary on Sahm. “Most people know the Willie story. And that is indeed justified as epic. But those people that know that story don’t know that this is kind of the story behind the story. Doug made Willie possible in so many ways.”

Born on November 6, 1941, in San Antonio, Texas, Sahm was a prodigy who was performing country music on the radio by age five and playing fiddle, steel guitar, and mandolin by age eight. Before his teens, he had performed on country stages as “Little Doug” with legends Hank Thompson, Hank Williams, and Faron Young. Still, he developed much broader musical tastes, and he was deeply influenced by such blues and rock pioneers as Fats Domino, T-Bone Walker, and Howlin’ Wolf.

Sahm gradually abandoned country for the first wave of rock & roll, in the 1950s, and after high school he built a regional career as a performing and recording artist. In 1964, inspired by the Beatles craze, he helped found the Sir Douglas Quintet, made up of Texas musicians who dressed up and pretended to be part of the pop-rock “British Invasion.” Sahm wrote their 1965 smash hit, “She’s About a Mover,” and a year later, the group moved to San Francisco, where they became part of the city’s progressive music scene and continued to record.

The quintet broke up in 1972, and Sahm moved back to Texas, arriving in Austin at the brink of the city’s own music revolution. He returned “a full-blown rock star who, with his long hair and Stetson [cowboy hat], had invented the vogue of the cosmic cowboy before anyone in Austin knew it was cool,” his biographer, Jan Reid, wrote.

Always a genre bender, Sahm fused his traditional country roots to his rock style, and he found a welcome audience among young, progressive listeners. Sahm’s sound and swagger intrigued other artists, including Willie Nelson, who was back in his home state and working to reinvent himself after years of disappointment in Nashville.



“Willie wanted that rock & roll crowd, and Doug had them,” recalled Speedy Sparks, who played in the Sir Douglas Quintet. “Willie would come out and watch Doug and figure out what Doug was doing. Willie got the hip rednecks, and then he won everybody else over. At first, Doug was the king, not Willie or Jerry Jeff [Walker] or Waylon [Jennings].”

Both Sahm and Nelson were signed to recording contracts by New York producer Jerry Wexler. The raw, country-tinged *Doug Sahm and Band* was released in January 1973, but it met with mixed reviews and failed to gain attention. Six months later, the rocked-up *Shotgun Willie* was released, heralding Nelson’s renegade rebirth and capturing new audiences.

Never to be defined by genre, Sahm spent the rest of his life pouring different musical styles into his performing and recording: rock, blues, country, Cajun, Mexican polkas, Tejano, and anything else that caught his ear. His single Grammy is testimony to his eclectic career: his Tex-Mex “supergroup,” the Texas Tornados, won in 1991 for Best Mexican-American Performance. Bandmates included Tejano greats Freddy Fender and Flaco Jiménez and Sahm’s longtime keyboardist and collaborator Augie Meyers.

Sahm died at age fifty-eight in 1991 of a heart attack while asleep in a hotel room in Taos, New Mexico.

SOURCES

The Handbook of Texas Online
(Texas State Historical Association),
Magnet Magazine, *Texas Monthly*, *Texas Tornado*:
The Times & Music of Doug Sahm by Jan Reid
and Shawn Sahm

LISTEN

“At the Crossroads”
“It’s Gonna Be Easy” (written by Atwood Allen)
“Your Friends” (written by Deadric Malone)