

Remembering 'Texas Tornado' Doug Sahm

Sir Doug, who died 10 years ago, honored with new CD and several events at SXSW

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"You can never repay the people who make you into who you're supposed to be. That's what Doug did for me — he made me into someone I was always supposed to be. And he gave me the confidence to be that person."

Bill Bentley is on the phone from Los Angeles, talking about his friend and mentor Doug Sahm. Sahm, the protean San Antonio native who wove the wonderful and diverse strands of Texas roots music into a funky, multihued tapestry, died 10 years ago come November. Though he never racked up a string of hits, the name of this motormouthed, self-anointed "Texas Tornado" deserves to be writ large, alongside other pioneering Lone Star giants such as Ornette Coleman, Buddy Holly and Bob Wills.

Thanks to Bentley — former Austinite, journalist, record company executive and producer — and a lot of other folks, Sahm, his music and his legacy will have large roles in this year's South by Southwest Music Conference and Festival. He will be f?ted at the Austin Music Awards on Wednesday in a tribute starring his son Shawn, his former bandmate Augie Meyers and Alejandro Escovedo. Another show pays homage the following night at Antone's with Jimmie Vaughan, the Gourds, Dave Alvin and more. And Sahm's hippie era masterpiece, the 1969 album "Mendocino," (made when he was with the Sir Douglas Quintet) will be dissected at a SXSW panel at noon on Saturday, which Bentley will moderate.

One thing is for sure — Sahm himself would have eaten it up with a spoon.

"Doug wasn't a conceited guy, but he knew he was great," said Bentley, who dates his and Sahm's friendship to a night in 1971 when Sahm showed up at an Austin gig where Bentley was playing drums in a campus-area beer joint.

"He didn't make a big deal out of it. But when you played with Doug Sahm — and I played with him a couple of times — you always played better. Period.

"I saw him do whole sets with bands he'd never met. He didn't even know their names. He just went for it. Trust your soul, man. Trust your soul."

But Bentley isn't content to merely recycle good times and old memories. Together with co-producers Shawn Sahm and David Katznelson, he is the driving force behind "Keep Your Soul: A Tribute to Doug Sahm," a collection that will be released on the Vanguard label on March 24.

Featuring performances of Sahn originals by the likes of Los Lobos, Delbert McClinton, the Gourds, Alejandro Escovedo, a reunited Freda and the Firedogs (the '70s country-rock band fronted by singer Marcia Ball), East L.A. Chicano star Little Willie G. and others, the album not only mirrors Sahn's restless eclecticism, it reveals the enduring influence he has had on a dizzying array of musicians.

"I give Doug credit in practically every interview, particularly when I'm asked about influences," said Ball, who has evolved into a star in her own right. "He opened a lot of doors and focused a lot of attention on Austin by virtue of his own fame. The whole thing of Jerry Wexler coming to Austin, that happened because of Doug." (The famous Atlantic Records producer, who worked with the likes of Ray Charles and Aretha Franklin and invented the term "rhythm and blues," dedicated his autobiography to Sahn.)

Escovedo, who covers Sahn's "Too Little Too Late" on "Keep Your Soul," echoed the sentiment. "If someone asked me to do a tribute to whomever, I might consider it, I might not. But this one was a no-brainer," he said.

"Doug was a major fixture in Texas music and my upbringing. When I was growing up in Southern California, I embraced surfing, I embraced English rock 'n' roll, and rock 'n' roll in general. There weren't a lot of Chicano kids doing all that stuff. I was in a no-man's-land, in a way. Doug, on the other hand, came from an Anglo upbringing and embraced Chicano culture and Mexican music, and made it this totally different thing. He integrated a sound like no one had ever done before.

"He was a complete musician in the best of the Texas sense. You know, is he a hippie, is he a rocker, is he a country dude, a blues guy? But he was all those things. He represented freedom. That's always been extremely important to me."

Bentley, who produced two preceding tribute albums honoring Roky Erickson and Moby Grape's Skip Spence, knows that many, if not most of SXSW's forward-looking hipsters, might not know who Doug Sahn is. They might not know that he cut his first hit, "She's About A Mover," in 1965, might not know that his career was bookended by two wonderful bands (the '60s-era Sir Douglas Quintet and the all-star Texas Tornados), and might not know that his friends and admirers included Bob Dylan and members of the Rolling Stones.

But, by God, before Bentley's through this week, they will know one thing: "Doug Sahn was fearless."

That, as much as anything, was the quality that endeared Sahn to Bentley and inspired the younger man to reach beyond his grasp. "He lived for music, and no matter what style of music you play, that fearlessness is something all musicians should strive for," Bentley said. "Doug would play Lefty Frizzell country songs in front of a bunch of stoned San Francisco acid trippers. That's fearless!

"That's the key to Doug Sahn. He was probably the most fearless musician I ever met, and that can't be overvalued. If you're gonna create music, you have to be unafraid."

Toward the end of the conversation, Bentley grows reflective. "Honestly, I'm still not over him dying. He still talks to me. I'm not saying he was a perfect guy, because God knows, we're all human. But there's something that was inspirational about Doug at his best that's rarely equaled. He could turn people on not only to music, but life. He loved to get high and live. That was his whole thing."

Doug Sahm events at SXSW

- The Doug Sahm Tribute with Shawn Sahm, Augie Meyers and Alejandro Escovedo begins at 9:55 p.m. Wednesday at Austin Music Hall, 208 Nueces St., during the Austin Music Awards. The ceremony begins at 7:55 p.m. Tickets are \$15 (cash), \$16 (charge) at Waterloo Records, 600 N. Lamar Blvd.
- The Doug Sahm Tribute featuring Shawn Sahm, the Gourds, Dave Alvin, Jimmie Vaughan, Sarah Borges begins at 8 p.m. Thursday at Antone's, 213 W. Fifth St. (This is an official SXSW event.)
- Bill Bentley will moderate the panel "Doug Sahm's 'Mendocino'" from noon to 1:15 p.m. Saturday in Room 16B of the Austin Convention Center. On the panel: Harvey Kagan, Augie Meyers, Margaret Moser, Jan Reid and Shawn Sahm. (Panel for SXSW badgeholders only.)