

SXSW Panel: Doug Sahm's "Mendocino"

John T. Davis

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It's been 40 years since the gleeful yelp of "The Sir Douglas Quintet is back!" kicked off "Mendocino," one of the signature albums of the incredibly fertile era of the late sixties. And, in many ways, it encapsulated the fusion of grooves that Doug Sahm synthesized throughout his prolific career.

A Saturday panel at the Austin Convention Center brought together producer and record exec Bill Bentley, who has co-produced a tribute album to Sahm, who died in 1999; Austin Chronicle writer Margaret Moser; author Jan Reid, who is penning a Sahm biography; SDQ alumni Augie Meyers and Harvey Kagan; and Doug's son Shawn to discuss the enduring impact of "Mendocino" and its creator.

"Most people never understood what a beautifully layered song that was," said Moser, citing the mixture of hippie pop and Chicano soul that characterized the song.

"It went pretty quickly," said Kagan, the Quintet's bassist for the sessions. "Most of it was first takes. Doug never was the type of person to do things over and over."

"That song was as simple as could be," said Shawn Sahm. "Dad traveled a lot and he had girlfriends all over the place. I had more stepmoms than anybody I knew. And he was in Mendocino with this young chick and that sparked the song."

The album helped make Sahm and the Quintet celebrities in the Bay Area, but his heart was always in Texas, and he moved back to Austin in 1973 and immediately galvanized the fledgling country-rock scene in town.

"Doug's arrival turned Austin around. We were all amateurs, bar-rats," said Bentley, who was drumming with a band at the time. "He turned everybody on to the professionalism that he had. We all knew that here was the one guy who really knew how to play. And at the same time, he would hang out and play with us and encourage us."

Meyers recalled the Quintet touring America and Europe behind Mendocino and hiding their pot in microphone stands. "So we went on the road with 25 or 50 mic stands," he recalled with a laugh.

"He'd call me up at my farm out in Bulverde, Texas, and say he was coming over for enchiladas," Meyers said. "And he'd show up with Bob Dylan. And then the next time, it would be Jerry Garcia."