

Doug Sahm
By Dave Hoekstra
April 10, 1992----

With his current tornadic itinerary, you would think Doug Sahm had thrown his trademark cowboy hat in the ring for president.

Sahm is front-runner for Tex-Mex rockers Sir Douglas Quintet as well as the conjunto/country band Texas Tornados. He was in town last week with the quintet. He is in town tonight with the Tornados.

He probably is somewhere right now shaking hands and kissing babies.

Even Sahm's sons are hot. Shawn, 27, and Shannon, 22, are members of the metal band Pariah. They will release their debut album next month on Geffen Records. And guitarist Shawn Sahm wrote a song that may be the next Tornado single.

The elder Sahm, who turns 50 in November, barely could catch his breath as he updated Sahmmania between sets at the quintet's show last Friday at FitzGerald's in Berwyn.

Did the success of the Texas Tornados light this fire?

"Absolutely," Sahm said while chowing down a slice of pizza. "The Tornado thing got us a Grammy (they won Best Mexican-American Performance for the 1990 track "Soy De San Luis" from their debut album) and all the attention. But country radio didn't know what to do with us. It became a Tex-Mex Grateful Dead scene. We just played before (a record matinee crowd of) 55,000 at the (Houston Livestock Show & Rodeo at the) Houston Astrodome.

"It got humongous.

"That's why I felt we gotta get back and play with the people. I'm looking forward to the Oak, wherever that is (it was an old north side movie palace, since razed). And it's opening day for the Cubs! I'll be there rain or snow."

It has been something of a stormy road for Sahm, who first left home in 1959 as a member of the Texas-based Doug Sahm and the Pharaohs. Until this year, Sahm's biggest brush with commercial crossover was as a founding member of the Sir Douglas Quintet, which had national hits with 1965's "She's About a Mover" and 1969's "Mendocino."

The Texas Tornados (taken from a nickname once bestowed upon Sahm) were formed in December, 1989, on an idea by Harry Duncan, the booker at Slim's,

the San Francisco club co-owned by Boz Scaggs.

Heartbreak crooner Freddie Fender had been playing small country halls across America, but Duncan arranged for Fender to appear in a Tex-Mex setting with Sahm, keyboardist Augie Meyers, co-founder of the Sir Douglas Quintet, and conjunto accordion virtuoso Flaco Jimenez. A year later, Sahm had his first Grammy in what was then a 26-year career.

"To tell you the truth, if we didn't have this visibility, I don't know if I'd be doing all this," Sahm said. "That's what baseball is about for me. It's a great escape. (Sahm once covered spring training for Texas Monthly magazine.) Let's face it, how many guys get two major record deals at 50 years old? I feel very fortunate. But, then I'm the king of dropout. I still could drop out next week. It's good for your mental health."

The Tornados begin work on their third album for Reprise Records on April 20. The Sir Douglas Quintet has been signed by Elektra Records, and their new record will be out early next year.

"With the quintet, we've cut about four songs with Cosmo (ex-Creedence Clearwater drummer Doug Clifford) and my two sons," Sahm said. "It's heavy rock. It won't be a Texas Tornado, Tex-Mex thing. We will update some of the quintet stuff. This is really a hybrid rock 'n' roll band. It would really be a mind boggler if you knew the person behind it, but I really can't say yet. We have to put it under wraps because it kind of confuses people. I want people to understand that no way are we abandoning the Tornados."

Clifford first played with Sahm in 1966 when Creedence was known as the Golliwogs. Clifford played on and produced a 1974 Warner Bros. LP that delivered the single "Groover's Paradise," which the quintet performed at FitzGerald's.

In 1983, Clifford joined a six-piece quintet that Sahm formed to record "The Midnight Sun," which was never released in America despite being a huge hit in Scandinavia. "The Midnight Sun" included rhythm and blues covers such as "Sugar Bee" as well as an engaging version of John Fogerty's "Bad Moon Rising."

Sahm explained: "What we're doing is kind of like what (Jerry) Garcia and (Bob) Weir do with the (Grateful) Dead. For example, Augie has his solo album ("White Boy") coming out at the end of this month. Flaco's got one ("Partners") in the works with Emmylou Harris (as well as guest appearances from Stephen Stills, John Hiatt, Ry Cooder, Linda Ronstadt, Dwight Yoakam and Los Lobos). And in June they're releasing all the stuff on Atlantic."

All the stuff on Atlantic covers one of the most interesting periods of

Sahm's career. In what was supposed to be his big break, Sahm was signed to Atlantic Records under the guidance of legendary rhythm and blues producer Jerry Wexler, who at the time was making overtures to country music. Before Sahm, Wexler had signed Willie Nelson.

The subsequent "Doug Sahm and Band" and "Texas Tornado" albums featured current Tornado bandmates Jimenez and Meyers as well as Bob Dylan, David "Fathead" Newman and Dr. John. Unlike the wanderlust that defines Sahm, the records went nowhere.

"I went back and listened to 32 tapes from those sessions in one day," Sahm said. "There will be four or five unreleased songs. (Rock journalist) Chet Flippo did the liner notes for the compilation. Some people missed this stuff the first time around. When fans come to our gigs they don't bring one record they saw on MTV. They bring 15 or 20. I like that."

Very few rock musicians have been on the road as consistently as Sahm. Although he dropped out for two years in the mid-1980s to live in Sweden, Sahm said, "I'm more comfortable on the road. When I went to spring training, I got in the car and drove in the desert under a full moon. I get my jazz cassettes and I'm sittin' there in a nice Lincoln or Cadillac, man. And I'm cruising into the great beyond. I'm just the happiest cat in the world. They call me Commander Groover."

And that's just what this country needs. A chicken in every pot, a car in every garage. And a Commander Groover.