

Doug Sahm Obituary
By Dave Hoekstra

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It's not surprising that Doug Sahm, who died today at age 58 of natural causes, cultivated a large following in Chicago. His music struck a chord in the city's many ethnic communities.

A native of San Antonio, Texas, he founded the Sir Douglas Quintet, the '60s pop group that had hits with the Tex-Mex-influenced "She's About a Mover" and "Mendocino." He was also a founding member of the Grammy Award-winning Texas Tornados, the genre-bending band that blended country, rock, R&B and conjunto.

And Sahm could sing the blues. He was a devoted Cubs fan.

In his typically hyperkinetic style, Sahm once interrupted a phone interview from his Austin, Texas, home by screaming, "Guess what I'm looking at on my wall right now? How about an autographed picture of Dee Fondy (the Cubs first baseman between 1951-57)! I'm probably the only guy in the state of Texas with an autographed black-and-white picture of Dee Fondy."

Douglas Wayne Sahm's lust for life defined his music.

Known around San Antonio as "Little Doug," he was playing non-pedal steel guitar and fiddle at 8 years old and sitting in with country greats Hank Thompson and Webb Pierce. At age 13, he was asked to join the Grand Ole Opry, but remained in San Antonio, where he finished high school.

"This is a big loss for the music industry and Doug's compadres," said conjunto accordionist Flaco Jimenez, one of Sahm's Texas Tornado bandmates, from his San Antonio home. "He was a musical creator. He was the first one to introduce me to a wider audience. Doug sure didn't have a one-track mind."

Sahm indeed roared across the rock 'n' roll landscape like a Texas tornado. He touched down in 1964, when Texas producer Huey P. Meaux, who shaped the career of Freddy Fender, paired Sahm with Vox organist Augie Meyers to form the Sir Douglas Quintet as a response to the Beatles.

But Sahm and Meyers took the British Invasion one dance step further by adding Mexican polka to its pop-rock mix. Longtime Chicago disc jockey Dick Biondi helped break "She's About a Mover" in 1965 by putting the song in heavy rotation on WLS.

Sahm again touched down in 1973 when he was signed to Atlantic Records by legendary R&B producer Jerry Wexler (who was making overtures to country music and had previously signed Willie Nelson). The subsequent "Doug Sahm and Band" and "Texas Tornado" records featured Jimenez and Meyers as well as Bob Dylan, David "Fathead" Newman and Dr. John.

Fifteen years later, the Texas Tornado concept finally broke through. Formed in 1989, the Sahm-Meyers-Jimenez-Fender supergroup won a 1991 Grammy for its first album. In 1997, the Tornados had a top 40 dance hit with Sahm's "A Little Bit Is Better Than Nada" from the "Tin Cup" soundtrack. At Sahm's death, the Tornados were working on the soundtrack for an upcoming Jimmy Smits film.

The possibilities of the open road spoke to his soul. He was at home at the Cubby Bear, FitzGerald's, or the gin mills of Calumet City. "I'm more comfortable on the road," he told me in 1992. "I get in the car and drive 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 the happiest cat in the world. They call me `Commander Groover'!"

Thanks for the ride, Commander.