

Sir Douglas Quintet

The Sir Douglas Quintet: Emerging from San Antonio's "West Side Sound," The Sir Douglas Quintet blended rhythm and blues, country, rock, pop, and conjunto to create a unique musical concoction that gained international popularity in the 1960s and 1970s. From 1964 to 1972, the band recorded five albums in California and Texas, and, although its founder, Doug Sahm, released two additional albums under the same group name in the 1980s and 1990s, the Quintet never enjoyed the same domestic success as it had during the late 1960s.



A big part of the Sir Douglas Quintet's distinctive sound derived from the unique musical environment in which its members were raised in San Antonio. During the 1950s and 1960s, the "moderate racial climate" and ethnically diverse culture of San Antonio—caused in part by the several desegregated military bases and the large Mexican-American population there—allowed for an eclectic cross-pollination of musical styles that reached across racial and class lines. As a result, Sahm and his musical friends helped create what came to be known as the "West Side Sound," a dynamic blending of blues, rock, pop, country, conjunto, polka, R&B, and other regional and ethnic musical styles into a truly unique musical amalgamation. San Antonio-based artists, such as Augie Meyers, Doug Sahm, Flaco Jiménez, and Sunny Ozuna, would help to propel this sound onto the international stage.

Born November 6, 1941, Douglas Wayne Sahm grew up on the predominately-black east side of San Antonio. As a child, he became proficient on a number of musical instruments and even turned down a spot on the Grand Ole Opry (while still in junior high school) in order to finish his education. In 1953, Sahm met Augie Meyers, the son of a storeowner in nearby St. Hedwig. Meyers, like Sahm, was passionate about music and became an expert organ and guitar player. The two spent much of their free time attending concerts at the nearby Eastside Country Club and other mixed-race venues, where they often listened to and jammed with country and rhythm and blues musicians.

During the mid-1960s, the so-called "British Invasion" brought a flood of English pop-rock groups, including the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, the Hollies, and the Dave Clark Five, to the United States, where they dominated radio airwaves and record sales. The British Invasion revolutionized American pop music, as hundreds of bands in Texas and elsewhere sought to imitate the new "mod" beat of these wildly successful English groups. In 1964, Sahm and Meyers were exposed directly to the impact of the British invasion when their two bands, Meyers's "The Goldens" and Sahm's "Markays" opened for the Dave Clark Five.

Houston-based record producer Huey P. Meaux also wanted to capitalize on the new British sound. Reportedly, Meaux locked himself in a hotel room "with a bottle of Thunderbird wine and every Beatles record that he could find," studying the new mod style and concluded

that the music's beat was similar to a Cajun two-step. Meaux soon contacted Sahm, who had been seeking a record deal from the producer for several years, and told him to "grow his hair out, form a group, and write a song with a Cajun two-step beat." Meaux suggested that they call the band The Sir Douglas Quintet, in hopes that the English-sounding name would help sell records. The quintet—which featured Sahm on vocals, Meyers on organ, bassist Jack Barber, drummer Johnny Perez, and saxophonist Frank Morin—quickly scored a Top 20 hit in 1965 with "She's About a Mover."

After touring the United States and Europe for less than a year, the band returned home to Texas. Upon arrival at the Corpus Christi airport in 1966, Sahm was arrested for possession of marijuana. Following the arrest, Sahm and Morin left the Lone Star State for San Francisco, the "Mecca" of the hippie counter-culture movement. Once in San Francisco, Sahm and Morin reformed the Sir Douglas Quintet with several other local musicians and released *Sir Douglas Quintet +2= Honkey Blues* on Smash Records. Lacking the earlier signature organ sound, Sahm convinced Augie Meyers, along with Johnny Perez, and bassist Harvey Kagan, to move to California. With most of the original Texas line-up back together, the Sir Douglas Quintet released *Mendocino* in 1969. This album proved very popular with rock, country, and Tex-Mex fans domestically and abroad, and, it became the group's sole million-dollar seller, in part because of its Top-40 title track.

Riding on the success of *Mendocino*, the Quintet released two more albums in 1970, *1+1+1=4* and *Still Together after Five*. While contemporary music critics hailed *Still Together* calling it, "perhaps the best recorded version of the Augie Meyers 'cheap organ' sound," they were left confused by the genre-crossing nature of *1+1+1=4*. By 1971, the band members were beginning to drift apart, and a homesick Sahm returned to Texas to pursue new musical endeavors. One year after Sahm's return to the Lone Star State, the Quintet disbanded. Mercury Records issued an album of unreleased tracks entitled *Rough Edges* in 1973, but this would be the last album from the Sir Douglas Quintet for a decade. Reviving the Sir Douglas moniker in 1983, Sahm reunited with Meyers and Morin to create *Border Wave*. Domestically the album was not as popular as most earlier works, but it did significantly increase the band's international following. The Sir Douglas Quintet would release one more album, 1994's *Day Dreaming at Midnight*, before Sahm's death in 1999.

In the span of its career, the Sir Douglas Quintet elevated the unique and eclectic regional style of San Antonio's West Side Sound to international popularity. The Quintet also helped lay the groundwork for the phenomenal worldwide success of Sahm and Meyers's subsequent Grammy-winning supergroup, The Texas Tornados. In the process, Sahm, Meyers, and their bandmates helped carry the distinctive musical influences found in Texas and the Southwest to audiences around the globe.

Chris Lehman