

Day of the Doug / Son Volt

Son Volt's latest record, *Day of the Doug*, revisits the music of legendary Texas troubadour Doug Sahm. But it's much more than fond remembrance and colorful tribute. It is a summoning and a celebration of a songwriter and performer whose work forged country, Tex-Mex, rock, rhythm and blues, folk, and psychedelia into an utterly unique American sound.

Sahm's 50-year career was a restless and relentless quest for the Holy Grail of "the groove." He played pedal steel with Hank Williams, Sr. as a kid before making three Top 40 hits with the Sir Douglas Quintet and recording a dizzying array of solo works with a passel of shifting personas on a carousel of record labels. Son Volt's eleventh release since 1995's *Trace* steps confidently on the trails Sahm blazed. Like any journey to find a grail, *Day of the Doug* also seeks out all the things that make young artists fall in love with making music in the first place: adventure, youth novelty, and a chance to snatch a bit of immortality.

"It's like reconnecting with a hero," says Son Volt founder Jay Farrar. "And getting back to the same kind of perspective I had when I was starting out as a younger musician. I think it's just important to step back from what you normally do. Take stock. Take inspiration. And see where it leads from there."

Where the path leads Son Volt on its new record is to an ebullient exploration of Doug Sahm's universe. It's a sweetly jaunty landscape even bigger than Texas, where the skies are sunny, the women are dynamite (even when they break your heart), and the barbecue pit lends its hickory odor to an endless party where everyone's welcome (and the beer is cheap). Ripples of keyboard, fiddle, and pedal steel suggest the array of sonic textures found on Sahm's recorded work, but the foundation for each interpretation is Son Volt's own potent blend of rock, folk and country. And the current Son Volt lineup surrounding Farrar – Andrew DuPlantis (vocals, bass), Mark Spencer (backing vocals, keyboard, guitar), John Horton (guitar, slide guitar, baritone, bass) and Mark Patterson (drums, percussion) – brings its distilled craft and savvy energy to every note of *Day of the Doug*.

"He's kind of a musical shapeshifter," observes Farrar. "From Tex-Mex to country to blues to San Antonio rhythm and blues to '60s pop to Cajun fiddle music. He's always mostly following the inspiration – and then, occasionally, follows the money enough to find inspiration. He's kind of a role model in that respect." He adds that 2023 is an opportune time to pluck tunes from the Sahm songbook and try them on for size: "It was time for Son Volt to do a project where we could be more at ease. Doug's songs gave us that. Doing original songs is working with a lot of unknowns. You're trying different approaches to see what works. Doing Doug's music was more like a blueprint with the foundation already there. It was just a matter of: 'How do we want to add to it?'"

Day of the Doug envisions Sahm's work anew as it connects with the timeless elements within it. Sir Douglas Quintet classics like "Yesterday Got In The Way," "What About Tomorrow?" and "Seguin" gain a straightforward suppleness and muscle here, while plaintive nuggets like "Keep

Your Soul” and “Huggin’ Thin Air” nudge strongly toward a robust country feel. Son Volt’s flat-out rock takes on “Float Away” and “Juan Mendoza” (both sung by DuPlantis) promise to be live show highlights, while the band’s take on “Poison Love” – a Johnnie and Jack chestnut covered by Sahn on *Doug Sahn and Band* (1973) – blossoms richly as it savors deeply of Tex-Mex sounds.

The songs chosen for *Day of the Doug* are key to its success. The record eschews Sahn hits like “She’s About a Mover” and “Mendocino” to mine one of the richest veins in his work – a prolific period from the late 1960s through the 1970s featuring classic records like *Groovers Paradise* (1974) and *Texas Rock for Country Rollers* (1976). Farrar says the pandemic gave him a chance to dive into *The Complete Mercury Masters* – a comprehensive 2005 reissue of Sahn’s late recordings with the Sir Douglas Quintet and his early solo material. “Those songs just blew me away,” he recalls. “Because even up until recently, I hadn’t really heard them, because Doug’s records are so hard to find.”

Indeed, one explicit aim of *Day of the Doug* is to excavate some of the best lesser known tunes in the Sahn canon. “My mode of picking the songs was primarily to celebrate the ones that I thought were overlooked,” says Farrar. “‘Beautiful Texas Sunshine.’ That’s just a great country rock song again that – at least to my thinking – has been somewhat overlooked. So I wanted to celebrate that.” The message of “Sometime You’ve Got to Stop Chasing Rainbows” – Sahn’s pointed reflection on the vicissitudes of the music industry – also resonates with Son Volt’s leader. “There’s a line in there: ‘I tried so hard in the record business,’” says Farrar. “All musicians can relate to that.”

The resonances of Farrar’s own time in the record business – and his personal connection with Sahn – also flow through *Day of the Doug*. His duet with Sahn on his classic tune “Give Back the Key to My Heart” is one of the highlight tracks on Uncle Tupelo’s final record, *Anodyne* (1993). Farrar recalls that Bottle Rockets front man Brian Henneman first waxed poetic about the Sir Douglas Quintet in the late 1980s, and it’s no surprise that the now-legendary “Coffee Creek” gigs both songwriters played together in St. Louis’s Cicero’s Basement Bar in the early 1990s (with original Uncle Tupelo members Mike Heidorn and Jeff Tweedy) featured a heaping helping of Sahn-associated covers, including “Texas Me.”

Farrar’s bond with Sahn “was very much a mentor/ student sort of relationship.” Watching him in the studio during the making of *Anodyne*, Farrar noticed “the ease at which he got down to recording, and the enthusiasm that he put into it.” The power of example in that session was inescapable, especially when Sahn’s energy spilled over and the headstock of his guitar plonked a microphone. “It gave the audio recording engineers a headache,” recalls Farrar. “But it was a great performance. So it all got kept. To our young minds at that point, we were blown away, and just thinking: ‘Wow. That’s how you do it.’”

As Farrar notes in his book, *Falling Cars and Junkyard Dogs*, their relationship extended past the *Anodyne* sessions. *Day of the Doug* opens and closes with two snippets of a Sahn voice message to Farrar on which he sings a bit of Son Volt’s “Tear Stained Eye” down the phone and announces his upcoming itinerary. It’s a fond nod to the recorded voice mail greeting that ends

Sahm's posthumous record, *The Return of Wayne Douglas* (2000). "I'm just thankful that I was able to keep that cassette message that he left," says Farrar. "It shows the charm of Doug. You know. 'Little dude' and 'Big Jay' – all in the span of two sentences."

Day of the Doug is Farrar's opportunity to pick up that thread of musical kinship with Sahm across decades. "He's a larger than life character," says Farrar. "He reminds me of Neal Cassady from *On the Road*. His life was epic." And Son Volt's affection for Sahm's songs – and its fresh invigorating take on them – makes the record a rollicking and supremely relaxed triumph that gives a new generation of listeners a window into an artist whose work still resonates today across many musical genres. The shoes Sahm left behind may be worn by their many travels, but *Day of the Doug* shows that they fit a band in its prime perfectly.