

Steve Douglas

By Rob Bowman



ALTHOUGH FEW FANS KNEW STEVE DOUGLAS BY name, the sound of his muscular, R&B-inflected baritone and tenor sax playing was an essential ingredient of innumerable late-Fifties and early-Sixties hits, including the Ventures' "Walk - Don't Run," Bob & Earl's "Harlem Shuffle," the Crystals' "He's a Rebel," the Beach Boys' "Shut Down" and Jan & Dean's "The Little Old Lady (From Pasadena)." In fact, virtually every sax solo on a rock record emanating from Los Angeles in the first half of the 1960s was played by Steve Douglas, and every subsequent saxophonist in rock history, from Denny Payton of the Dave Clark Five to Clarence Clemons of the E Street Band, owes a significant debt to Douglas's palpably intense approach to the instrument.

Born in Los Angeles in 1938, Douglas spent his childhood in Fresno before moving back to L.A. at age thirteen. Growing up in a musical family (his mother sang with Stan Kenton), Douglas studied trumpet, trombone and violin. When he heard L.A. horn player Chuck Higgins wail the intoxicating "Pachuco Hop," he decided to teach himself to play tenor sax. Within months, Douglas was playing on local sessions and appearing with a variety of bands at the legendary Hunter Hancock-hosted El Monte Legion Stadium rock shows.

In late 1958, not long after graduating from Fairfax High School (which Phil Spector attended at the same time), Douglas joined Duane Eddy and the Rebels, playing the sax solos on "Cannonball," "Forty Miles of Bad Road" and, most notably, "Peter Gunn," among other hits. The last is arguably Douglas's finest moment. Over the course of two and a half minutes, Douglas swings, rolls and rocks as he blows lascivious chorus after chorus of hair-raising raunch and roll, driving the recording to a series of increasingly intense climaxes. One minute he's blowing in the high register, his tone on the verge of breaking up as he pushes the barriers of sonic taste into the rock & roll stratosphere. The next minute he's extracting meaty low-end grunts and groans from the instrument, guaranteed to drive any rock & roll hipster out of his cotton-picking mind. Douglas was the real deal, and anyone with ears knew it. According to drummer Hal Blaine, "Steve had that honking thing *down!*"



After Douglas left Eddy in 1960, he became an in-demand session player on a cornucopia of R&B, rock and pop sessions. Douglas also led a band that included Spector as lead vocalist and guitarist. The band broke up when Spector headed to New York in 1961. Within a year, Spector had started Philles Records and was flying Douglas to the East Coast to overdub his earthy sax tones on the earliest Crystals recordings. When Spector elected to move Philles to Los Angeles, he tapped Douglas to put together a session band that included Hal Blaine, pianists Leon Russell and Don Randi, bassist Ray Pohlman (replaced by Carol Kaye after his death) and guitarists Glen Campbell, Howard Roberts and Tommy Tedesco.

Known as the Wrecking Crew, Douglas and company defined the sound of West Coast rock & roll in the early 1960s, playing on virtually every Beach Boys recording from 1963's *Surfin' USA* through 1966's *Pet Sounds*. During the next few years, Douglas appeared on nearly every surf and hot-rod record cut on the West Coast. He also worked on sessions for artists ranging from Nancy Sinatra to Sam Cooke to Elvis Presley.

Between 1964 and 1967, Douglas served as an A&R exec at Capitol, producing hits by Glen Campbell and Bobby Darin, among others. He signed Billy Preston to Capitol and produced the keyboardist's *Wildest Organ in Town!* After his superiors overruled his attempt to sign Aretha Franklin, Douglas left to head Mercury's West Coast office, signing Leon Russell and the Asylum Choir and Blue Cheer. Douglas subsequently ran his own label, Pentagram Records.

In 1978, Douglas went on the road to play sax on Bob Dylan's Asian, European and American tours and appeared on *Street-Legal* and *Bob Dylan at Budokan*, then worked in Ry Cooder's road band and played on Cooder sessions for the next fifteen years. A solo Douglas recorded some jazzy New Age albums, including *The Music of Cheops* (cut inside the Great Pyramid at Giza).

Douglas's prodigious recording credits have ranged from Frank Sinatra to B.B. King, Ricky Nelson to J.J. Cale. Poignantly, while playing a session for Cooder on April 19, 1993, Douglas suffered a fatal heart attack. Tonight he takes his rightful place as a member in the sideman category of the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. □

