



info7141004 🏠 · Feb 20, 2020 · 4 min read

# Houston loses Don Sanders, its musical ‘Mayor of Montrose’

*This article originally appeared in the [Houston Chronicle](#) by Andrew Dansby.*

In the 1960s and '70s, Houston's music scene had a strong gravity on great singer-songwriters, pulling in artists from places in Texas near and far; from Townes Van Zandt, who hailed from Fort Worth, to Guy Clark, who grew up in Rockport. Eric Taylor stopped in Houston on the way from Georgia to Los Angeles.

Don Sanders was an exception. He was a Houston native who became an integral part of the city's music scene for more than a half century. When Anderson Fair was the epicenter for folk music in Houston, he was the “Mayor of Montrose,” a local luminary at the center of a deep pool of talent that had gathered in Houston. And while he was capable of painting vivid portraits of Houston and Texas, Sanders traveled the world and returned with smart songs from points afar.

Sanders died Saturday after a long illness. He was 73.

“To me, among songwriters, he had this quintessential understanding of Houston,” said Lyle Lovett, a friend and fan.

Tim Leatherwood, owner and operator of Anderson Fair, said Sanders was a Houston fixture for years.

“He was a big inspiration for a lot of people for a long time,” Leatherwood said. “This gentle, creative spirit who was also a leader who inspired people like Lyle, Lucinda Williams and Eric Taylor. He was a cornerstone among writers here.”

Lovett worked at the Battalion as a student at Texas A&M in the late '70s. Sanders was the first songwriter he interviewed for the paper. Lovett went to see him that weekend at Anderson Fair, where Sanders was a cornerstone performer.

“I walked through the archway and it was deadly quiet,” Lovett recalled. “Everybody hung on every word he sang, this guy I spent three hours across the table from, interviewing. He seemed 10 feet tall with this incredible stage presence. Everything was articulated perfectly. The way he moved, enunciated, the expression on his face. There was nobody like him. He communicated with his whole body.”

Lovett would go on to record Sanders' "The Bayou Song," and said he sings Sanders' "Coffee Song" to his children.

Sanders' sensibility is nicely summarized by those two songs. The former is a marvel of songwriting, starting with specificity in detail: "When I was a child, we lived a mile from the bayou, my parents hard working the dry August ground." Sanders was a philosophy major at the University of Houston, so the song swiftly steers into a lovely, haunting and contemplative space: "There's a spirit that covers the bayou, a surface quiet and calm."

"Coffee Song" sounds almost like a vaudeville standard, the sort of song Leon Redbone would have unearthed from years before. The refrain, "waiting for my coffee to boil," sounds sweetly simple, though like much of Sanders' work, there was more going on beneath the whimsical "blurps" he sang to mimic the sound of a percolator.

Like too few great songwriters — John Prine, Roger Miller and John Hartford come to mind — he was deft with both serious and light fare, unafraid to peer toward the abyss, but never consumed by it.

Sanders graduated from UH in 1965 and a year later threw himself into the city's singer-songwriter venues like Sand Mountain Coffee House and the Jester, and later the Old Quarter and Anderson Fair.

He told the Chronicle's Rick Campbell that he sought a variation on the singer-songwriter format in the late-'60s. "I was bored with the singer-songwriter performance format — introduction, song, a little joke, anecdote, song — and I got this idea of combining songs with longer, more complex stories," Sanders said.

Sanders traveled to Spain and studied centuries-old folk tale traditions. He returned to work on a performance structure that fell in a space between concert and theater. It didn't click in Houston, so he tried his hand in San Francisco.

By 1971 he was back in Houston playing clubs and working at KPFT.

Sometimes the results of his writings were joyous sing-alongs, even as they touched on politics of the age dappled with politics from a few years before. Like "Third Eye," which opens to a naked Richard Nixon seeking some sort of assistance a woman in a black leather mask because "I heard you are a spiritual girl."

Then the song really gets weird.

Sanders started his own record label and released a self-titled album in 1973, and "Extended Play" a year later. They require quite a hunt these days, though songs from that era found their way to Spotify as part of "Heavy Word User (The Vinyl Years 1971-1975)."

"He didn't have a lot of recorded material," Leatherwood said. "But he's one of those guys who you can tell made an impact. There are a lot of stories about him that are surfacing this week."

made an impact. There are a lot of stories about him that are surfacing this week.

In addition to his own work, Sanders recognized the great songs by his peers and outsiders, too. Lovett recalled seeing Sanders play Van Zandt's classic "Pancho and Lefty" at Anderson Fair, the first time Lovett had heard the song live. And Sanders wasn't limited to songwriter fare by Texas troubadour types. He routinely covered rock acts he admired like Patti Smith.

Sanders was more easily seen and heard in clubs than on record, though. When he released "Promisin' Boy," an album in 1994, he told the Chronicle, "It was enough to be an artist," in the '70s. "Also an 'artist' had more of a cachet. Nowadays there's a million singer-songwriters. Now, I have to be able to make a living."

Sanders over the past decade or so recorded more frequently. He released a record based on some Mexican folk songs, "El Mosquito in My Kitchen," in 2006. And he put out "Tourist Revisited" in 2013 and "Limelight" in 2015.

Like others from that golden era, Sanders could summon a world of sound with just his voice and guitar.

"He wasn't just a strummer," Lovett said. "He's one of those shining examples of a guy who is an orchestra just in the way he played guitar."