

Donovan still a Sunshine Superman at 62

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Donovan was inspired.

"I'm singing in the rain," he started softly. Then with feeling, "Just singing in the rain!" Donovan was dancing, waving the ridiculous umbrella and, yes, laughing at the clouds — still a Sunshine Superman at age 62.

The bright psychedelic spotlight faded awhile ago, but these are busy days for Donovan. In Woodstock to promote the DVD "Sunshine Superman: The Journey of Donovan," he also talked enthusiastically about his upcoming double album "Ritual Groove" and a planned tour of North America and Europe. And while folks at the film festival seemed more interested in asking him about the '60s — mostly about his pals in the Beatles — that was OK too.

At a festival question-and-answer session, Donovan told how George Harrison suffered stiff knees while learning the sitar. He even sang an unrecorded verse of "Hurdy Gurdy Man" written by his old Beatle chum. He talked about leaving a private audience with the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi as the Grateful Dead were walking in and how he first heard the sitar music of Ravi Shankar during a wild night out.

"I got very, very involved in a paisley patterned carpet, I remember," Donovan said to laughter. "It took me a long while to come out of that carpet."

The DVD by director Hannes Rossacher covers a lot of the same ground. It tells the story of a scruffy teenager from Scotland with a guitar and a cap who, inevitably, was compared to Bob Dylan, when he hit it big in London in 1965. The folkie gear was soon enough ditched for Carnaby Street-wear as Donovan produced a string of catchy '60s pop gems like "Mellow Yellow" and "Sunshine Superman."

The DVD also solves the minor mystery of who Saffron was and why Donovan was so mad about her. Actually, it's not strictly a who, but a what: the young artist really liked saffron bread. The film does not explicate "electrical banana."

In retrospect, Donovan seems like a Swinging London Zelig. He can be seen playing guitar in Bob Dylan's hotel room in "Don't Look Back," the documentary of Dylan's 1965 tour of Great Britain. He went with the Beatles to India to see the Maharishi. Donovan taught John Lennon a finger-picking technique used in "Dear Prudence." Some of the studio musicians on "Hurdy Gurdy Man" went on to form Led Zeppelin. While accounts vary, Donovan says Jimmy Page played guitar on the track.

Donovan says that in the London music scene of the '60s, everyone influenced everyone, and he takes credit for some of the influencing. He notes that the psychedelic stylings on the Beatles' album "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" came after "Sunshine Superman." And there was at least a hint of competition along with the groovy vibes, as Donovan makes clear in talking about "Superman" during an interview.

"My producer Mickie Most said 'Don't play it to Paul McCartney,'" he said. "Of course, I did."

Donovan's star waned after the '60s, though he still recorded and performed. Notable was the late '90s album "Sutras" produced by fellow meditation enthusiast Rick Rubin, who is famous for his reclamation work on old pros like Johnny Cash and Neil Diamond.

Donovan also is one of those artists whose melodies routinely pop up in films and TV. He says he gets a call at least every three weeks from people asking permission to use one of his songs. They're typically used by filmmakers as a shorthand to evoke the 60s, but not always.

Martin Scorsese memorably used the happy sing-along "Atlantis" in "Goodfellas" as a hoodlum is kicked to death. More recently, "Hurdy Gurdy Man" heightened the creepiness of a murder in 2007's "Zodiac." And his old chestnut "Catch the Wind" was used in a recent General Electric commercial promoting wind energy.

Donovan loves having his songs matched with images.

In that same vein, Donovan hopes that young filmmakers will use songs on his new album in their own creations. Meanwhile, he lives in Ireland's County Cork and is continuing the process of "tidying up" his legacy after more than 40 years in the business. The process kicked off with an autobiography a few years ago, extends through the new DVD and includes organizing and digitizing his old song tapes, some of which were long lost.

"It's kind of retrospective time, gathering the complete works," he said, "not that I'm packing to go anywhere."