



THE LEADER OF THE PACK

The composer Louis Hardin alias Moondog

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A PORTRAIT

In 1999 Louis Hardin alias Moondog, one of the most original composers of the 20th century, died at the age of 83. Almost unnoticed by the mainstream and avant-garde New Music circles, the prolific artist left behind an enormous body of work, composed strictly according to the principles of counterpoint. Those who knew of him, revered him: At the beginning of their career, the Beatles called themselves Johnny & The Moondogs. His songs were covered by such icons of the hippie era as Janis Joplin. The Minimalists in Philip Glass's circle consider him their musical idol and the "leader of the pack."

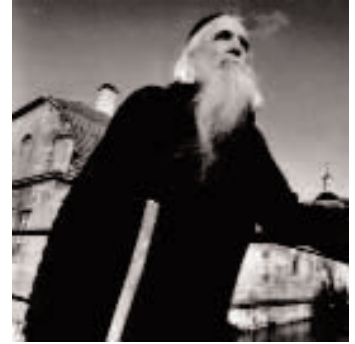
Contemporary DJs such as Mr. Scruff storm the charts with tracks incorporating samples of Moondog's work. And even the eminent Igor Stravinsky went on record saying, "The man must be considered a serious composer." Contemporary musicologists are beginning to discover Moondog's influence on musical developments in the last decades. And record stores must despair over the question of how to label the man's music: avant-garde, classical, pop, jazz, world, or minimalist music?

The son of a minister, Hardin is born in Kansas in 1916 and grows up in Wyoming. His musical initiation, so to speak, occurs when his father once takes him along to see the Arapaho Sun Dance. There he meets Chief Yellow Calf, who lets him sit on his lap and play the tom-tom. Young Louis loses his eyesight in an accident when he is sixteen.

As tragic as this loss was, it was to prove an enormous gain for the international music scene, for it is at a school for the blind in Iowa that Hardin has the opportunity to learn to play the violin, viola, piano, and organ. Sometime around 1947, the self-taught composer takes to calling himself Moondog – after a boyhood pet with a proclivity for howling at the moon.

Moondog moves to New York City in 1943. Sporting a spear and Viking helmet, he positions himself on the corner of 54th Street and 6th Avenue, later to be known as Moondog corner. There he is to be found, singing and playing his compositions on home-made drums and reciting his poems, for the next thirty years. The eccentric becomes a Big Apple landmark. In newspaper ads, the Hilton Hotel specifies its location as "across from Moondog." Eventually, he comes to the notice of such luminaries as Benny Goodman, Allen Ginsberg, Charlie Parker, Leonard Bernstein, Arturo Toscanini, and Igor Stravinsky.

Janis Joplin climbs the charts with her cover of his song All is Loneliness. In the late 1960's, Moondog records two albums for CBS with mini-symphonies, ballet and chamber music, and several jazz compositions. Through these recordings, he becomes known beyond New York. In 1974 Moondog suddenly vanishes from the scene. Many assume he has died; Paul Simon mourns the passing of this unique American composer on television.



Louis Hardin alias Moondog



LP: Moondog and his Friends



Moondog mit seiner Frau Suzuko



The viking of the 5th Avenue

But Moondog is alive and well; he has merely decided to stay in Germany after being invited to perform there. For him "the sacred land with the sacred river, the Rhine," marks the beginning of a phase in his life in which he intensively pursues his interest in the classical German composers.

Moondog composed his music according to the strict principles of counterpoint, a tradition of composing that goes back to the 17th century and further. The sequence of individual notes is assembled into a piece of music much like a mathematical formula. "In adhering to the principles of counterpoint, my music becomes transparent and accessible to anyone. It's like a spring with crystal-clear water where you can see the bottom. That's how compositions should be: as transparent as fresh water and not a bit muddy."

In contrast, the reasons for his move to Germany are anything but transparent. Initially, Moondog lives in seclusion and abject poverty, finding places to stay for the night through chance meetings on the street. Now and then, he is discovered by fans; his spontaneous performances leave the accidental audiences amazed and fascinated. The next day, Moondog is gone – always moving on, yet always at home in his world of sound and rhythm.

It is at one of these concerts that Ilona Göbel sees him for the first time. Fascinated, perhaps partly because she herself almost went blind once, the geology student decides she doesn't want to lose sight of Moondog. Göbel sets out to look for Moondog; she finds him in an attic room. And not a moment too soon. Moondog is in poor health, and it seems no one has taken any notice of the blind man in the attic. Göbel takes him home to stay with her parents, nurses him back to health, and gives up her studies to become his manager. She creates a sort of composer's paradise for Moondog, and he enters an intensive phase of work.

In 1989 Moondog resurfaces in New York – as suddenly as he had vanished. When the man people had thought dead returns there for several concerts, journalists bring old photographs with them to make sure they don't fall for a phony Moondog. But he's the genuine article and for many, the high point of the 10th New Music America Festival. This marks the beginning of his comeback, and New York celebrates the return of Moondog. The New York Times, People Magazine, and numerous radio and television stations devote lengthy articles and long features to the prodigal son. His old recordings are re-released on CD. And back in Germany he continues to record new work over the next years.

In the next decade, Moondog enjoys the status of a living legend. He is a presence on the international stage, performing in Paris, London, Vienna, and Munich, and working with musicians such as Elvis Costello, Stephan Eicher, London Saxophonic, and Ernst Märzendorfer.



In der Fußgängerzone
Recklinghausen



Moondog und Ilona Göbel



Im Studio



Moondog-Comic

And, if the "Moondog building" designed by French star architect and designer, Phillippe Starck, had actually been built as planned in Tokyo, the blind boy from Kansas really would have touched the sky. But, shortly after performing at the Festival for New Music in Arles in 1999, Louis Hardin passed away at the age of 83.

His legacy includes the staggering number of almost 2000 compositions, many of which have unfortunately not yet been transcribed from Braille. There are more than fifty symphonies, a nine-hour work by the name of Creation, pieces for percussion, the piano, and the organ. In addition, there are chamber music, Big Band orchestrations, innumerable songs, hundreds of poems, and the following statement: "Numbers are the origin, the root of all things. Just like there's a genetic code, there's a code for the existence of the entire universe. I have found it by studying overtones, or more precisely, in the vicinity of the ninth overtone. And this code proves: God exists."

MOONDOG – The Film

The starting point for the film is New York City, or to be more exact, New York in the 1950's. In the wild, restless atmosphere of those years which would prove such fertile soil for music, literature, and art, we will encounter a strange figure on 6th Avenue: A blind man in a Viking costume reciting quirky poems, singing, beating his drum, and engaging passersby in philosophical discussions. Who is this oddly-dressed man who is such a familiar sight on the streets of New York? A beggar, a lunatic, or a genius?

We will immerse ourselves in the diverse and fascinating world of Louis Hardin, a.k.a. Moondog. Who was this blind composer and musician, who was never a star himself yet was revered by so many stars of the music and culture scene? The film approaches this unusual character from different narrative angles.

• MOONDOG – Little-Known Genius

In interviews, prominent fans, musicians, and contemporaries will tell of the outstanding significance of Louis Hardin as a composer and explain why this eccentric personality never sought the spotlight and remained known only to the cognoscenti all his life.

• MOONDOG – The Composer

The film will include excerpts from film footage of Moondog during performances and rehearsals, and material featuring well-known artists from the classical, jazz, and New Music scenes performing his work. Musicians, composers, and musicologists will explain the uniqueness of his incredible range as a composer—which included everything from experimental percussion solos, compositions for the organ, symphonies, complex canons, and simple little songs. And last but not least, the film will feature Moondog's music – and we will attempt to develop a visual aesthetic to translate that music into images.



Moondog 1998



Festival in Arles 1999



Moondog LP -Cover (1956)



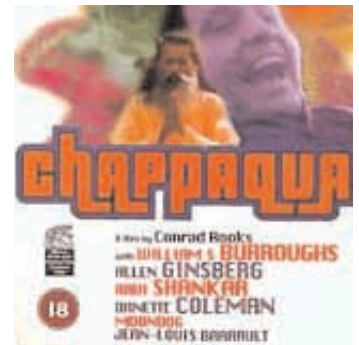
Moondog-Building von Phillippe Starck

- MOONDOG – The Nonconformist

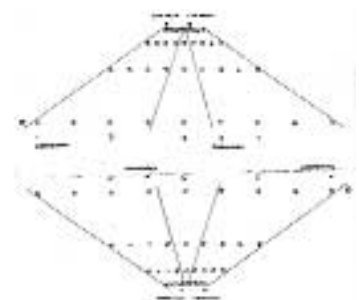
The film traces the different stations of Moondog's biography. What events influenced him? How did his life change when he lost his eyesight? How did his childhood experiences with Native Americans influence him? Did they inspire him to reject the materialist aspects of modern life? How did he spend his years on the streets of New York? Why did he decide to leave New York for the unspectacular German town of Recklinghausen? What kind of presence was he as a performer at various New Music Festivals? Moondog ever remained the nonconformist. Those who knew him and friends from various phases of his life will have an opportunity to tell us what they know and share their memories of him. Who was the "real" Moondog—and how close could one actually get to him?

- MOONDOG – A Man Not of This World

Moondog once said of himself, "I'm in the world but not of it". And yet he described the world around him in hundreds of poems. In our film, we also approach Moondog's personality through his philosophy, his poems, in which he comments on his time and the world around him with naive and yet radical verse. And, finally, we try to get to the bottom of why Louis Hardin thought the universal "world formula" was to be found somewhere in the area of the ninth overtone.



Chappaqua – Moondog im Film



Notation

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