





MOONDOG

THE VIKING OF 6TH AVENUE

The Authorized Biography

BY ROBERT SCOTTO

PREFACE BY PHILIP GLASS



Contents

Preface: Remembering Moondog by Philip Glass	11
Introduction	14
Prologue: Autumn, 1966	19

PART ONE: ROOTS (1916–1943)

Chapter One (1916–1929): Archdeacon Prettyman’s Animated Doll	29
--	-----------

An account of Louis Hardin’s childhood prior to his blindness; the various places he lived, his earliest proclivities and adventures; the family life that explains so many later developments will be explored.

Chapter Two (1929–1943): The First Violin	67
--	-----------

The accident causing his blindness; Louis’ coping with his handicap; his discovery of his lifelong vocation of music; the dissolution of his family, his schooling, his first marriage, his growing independence, his decision to go to New York.

PART TWO: THE TREE OF LIFE (1943–1974)

Chapter Three (1943–1953): Snaketime	87
---	-----------

Louis’ first decade in New York; his association with the New York Philharmonic; his pen name, Moondog, in 1947; his cross-country trip; his earliest successes, his earliest music and records, his life-style and growing reputation; his second marriage.

Chapter Four (1953–1960): Moondog Symphony	107
---	------------

His first albums, some on prestigious labels; the birth of his daughter; his court case with Alan Freed and WINS; the evolution of “the man with the face of Christ”; his ideas and opinions; his New Jersey and New York retreats; his separation.

Chapter Five (1960–1969): The Viking of Sixth Avenue	145
The emergence of Moondog as a striking New York personality of the Sixties; the evolution of his dress, image, work and reputation.	
Chapter Six (1969–1970): Wunderjahr	185
The year of his Columbia album, with the attendant publicity and excitement.	
Chapter Seven (1971–1974): Making the Rounds	201
The second Columbia album and its aftermath; his last cross-country tour; his final years in America at Candor prior to his trip to Germany.	

PART THREE: THE VIKING RETURNS (1974–1999)

Chapter Eight (1974–1987): Managarm	225
His first year in Germany on the streets; after 1975, with Ilona Goebel, the foundation of Managarm (Moondog Management) Musikverlag; his earliest German albums and publications (<i>The Creation</i> , <i>Thor the Nordoom</i> and <i>The Overtone Tree</i> , among others).	
Chapter Nine (1987–1999): Heimdall Fanfare	247
His final concerts, albums and artistic ventures; his growing reputation in Europe; his final move; his death on Sept. 8, 1999 in Munster.	

APPENDICES

1) Discussions of Moondog's music over five decades	275
2) Texts of Moondog, including parts of his <i>Perpetual Calendar</i> , <i>Thor</i> , and <i>The Song of Creation</i>	301
Index	317
CD Track Listing	320



Preface

Remembering Moondog

by Philip Glass

The *Village Voice* had a piece about Moondog needing somewhere to live, so I trekked out to his usual spot, in front of the Warwick Hotel, at 54th and 6th and invited him to stay at the house I was living in with my wife JoAnne Akalaitis. A few weeks later I get a call from Moondog from a pay phone; he sounded cautious but says he'd like to come check out the room.

I look out the window and the sight of Moondog crossing the street startled me. He was such an imposing figure, about six foot eight if you count his Viking headpiece, and he was so confident in his walk you wouldn't think he was blind. I wondered how, as a blind man, he managed to cross the street without an instant of hesitation until he showed me how he listened to the traffic lights; I had never heard them before in this way.

So here's Moondog at the front door, all stately and remarkable with horns on his head. I offer him our big room on our top floor. Moondog turns down the big room. He says he wants our small room, where he could stretch out his arms and feel the walls and ceiling. That's what he was comfortable with, like what he would eventually do in his tiny house upstate. The way he later described his upstate home, it sounded like a spider or an octopus, with small arms or corridors reaching out from the center.

He ended up living with us for nearly a year. I thought he was terrific, fascinating and musically very interesting. We formed a

music group, Moondog, Steve Reich, Jon Gibson and myself. For a time, we had weekly sessions playing Moondog's compositions. We took his work very seriously and understood and appreciated it much more than what we were exposed to at Juilliard. Steve recorded many of our sessions.

Moondog came from a true American tradition; he personified the maverick, solitary hero composer, like Nancarrow, Partch, Ives, and Ruggles. He really impressed me with his work, and that he could play all of his music. Once he gave me a gift of a big composition with 37 parts. I still have the music.

I was particularly interested in the way Moondog could work lyrically with odd rhythms; in a way it wasn't dissimilar from what I was doing at the time with Ravi Shankar. Moondog was quite interested in our work, too, and seemed to appreciate that we were also finding our own voices compositionally.

When he lived with us, Moondog was very connected to jazz. He'd stand in the stairway to the jazz club, Birdland, and play along with anything they were playing inside the club. I was amazed at his facility for doing this, and the way he could make music of found sounds. I remember him standing on the roof overlooking the Hudson River, and when the Queen Elizabeth ship pulled into port blowing its horn, Moondog would toot along with it on his bamboo flute.

As amazing as he was, he was a difficult guy, and a bit of a racist, too. He spoke of not liking black or Jewish people. He asked me whether I was Jewish, and I said I was. He then wondered why this happened to him, why all his best friends happened to be Jewish and black. He seemed genuinely sad and confused by this unfortunate circumstance.

Though he spent a year with us, I gave him lots of privacy. Before he moved to Germany, it did become uncomfortable at times. It seemed that he felt entitled to grab hold of any woman he could. He told me, "I can't be prosecuted for rape because they can't do that to blind people." Another uncomfortable thing about living with Moondog was that he didn't pick up after himself or

know how or bother to throw out the trash, so I spent some time cleaning up the fast food he brought to his room, like empty boxes from Dunkin' Donuts and half-eaten bones from Kentucky Fried Chicken.

I only saw him once after he moved to Germany. He came back once more to visit New York and we had a great dinner together at my home in the East Village.

Moondog lived a life of tremendous courage and discipline; he was an admirable, unique person and a personal inspiration.

Prologue: Autumn, 1966

Moondog, who had recently turned fifty, gets ready to start his work day. In order to beat the oppressive and dangerous pedestrian mobs at rush hour, he rises early and dresses meticulously. It takes him some time to assemble his outfit, especially in the narrow confines of his dank Aristo Hotel room, and the baggage he must carry along with it. It is, for a sightless man who dresses to be seen (“Who ever remembers the blind man with a tin cup?” he asks), a diligent, patient and laborious act. When he is finished, however, he is like no one else: the Viking of Sixth Avenue. Nearly every layer of his dress uniform is hand-made; every bit of his accoutrement marks a vivid moment in his life, a gift, a discovery, a transmutation. As the look evolved through the years, the simple garments composed of squares sewn together gave way to tunics and cloaks of one piece or a leather cape and leggings. His head is sometimes covered by a flat cap that comes to a point above his nose or, today, one of the trademarks of his latest image, the horned helmet with a wrap-around turban. The cup from which he drinks or accepts donations alternates between a hollow antler and a hollowed-out moose foot. The look is seamless, homogenous, revealing a man arriving at a statement rather than a plea or a cry of defiance. Although it seems paradoxical to some that his arcane appearance can be thought to reflect a sober, carefully worked-out behavioral idea, nonetheless

the Viking represents nearly thirty years of tangents aiming for a center, and he carries it with the assurance of a man who has earned the right to be outlandish in a very specific way.

The *New York Times* reported a year earlier (15 May 1965):

His new outfit is a velvet cloak and hood of brilliant scarlet, lined with pale green satin, and two pieces of thronged cowhide that partly cover his feet. He abandoned his old costume, made up of surplus army blankets, to “get away from the G.I. connotation.”

His dress, he tells passers-by, is “my way of saying no. I am an observer of life, a non-participant who takes no sides.” Now, at the Avenue of the Americas and 54th Street, “his favorite corner at the moment,” with the trimba alone of all his ’50s innovations—“the only musical instrument I have here”—he has transformed himself from the person he was when he had first “established himself as a landmark in Times Square,” standing on that traffic island and playing the oo and the uni.

Today, almost like a magician, he balances so much from leather lines. Over heavy, rough pantaloons goes a weighty brown toga, and over that the bright red woolen tunic. (Once he owned a bearskin as an outer garment until it fell apart from old age. A “berserker,” he would say, in Viking lore, he who “wears the bear’s shirt,” was believed to assume the animal’s physical strength: thus the legends of the ferocious special troops from the north. Alas, he would add, the word corrupted into a synonym for a crazy person, someone out of control, and the courageous warrior, like the pre-Christian Gothic world he defended, was buried by the victors.) The same red material wraps halfway up each of the horns of his helmet, which he affixes next. This is a complicated affair: bound by leather thongs, weighted with chain mail and sewn onto the hood cape of heavy muslin one shade lighter than the beige horns, it helps us focus on the particular charm of his face. His long, graying beard, his deep-set eyes, his chiseled, solid

cheekbones and nose, are there to impress. He appears more formidable and larger than his substantial frame is in reality—until he smiles. Often the loose-fitting, heavy headdress falls over his eyes, but it never seems to bother him. Suspended from the thongs underneath his chin is a leather strap that secures his spear, which always stands six feet straight up from the ground. No other blind man has a cane quite like this. From his wrist dangles an antler water jug. An inner series of pockets holds personal items like his Braille slate and “snatter,” a Braille book to read, some blank cards to write upon, some money. The payload, however, is carried in the duffel bag which he hefts over his shoulder, his “walking office.” Here is Moondog’s plenty, a complex blend of sophisticated survival tools and items for sale: his rack for displaying poems, music and records, his donation holder, announcements, booklets, curios, food, trimba. His last step is to lace up his footwear—it is impossible to call them shoes, and there are no socks—worn in a close wrap above the ankle. Thus draped, cinctured, clasped, laced, packed and fitted, he is ready to set out.

Upon leaving the Aristo, he walks carefully east to the Avenue of the Americas and then north to the Warwick Delicatessen, where he gets his take-out breakfast. Perhaps he may be slowed down by an admirer or an inquisitive out-of-towner or an especially congested intersection. Even before 9 a.m. the midtown area is a tangle of cabs, buses, trucks, carts, cars and pedestrians. Before the office towers around him have filled up, however, and after avoiding the low-hung parking restriction signs that used to cut into his face until he took to wearing protective headgear, he is at his station, 54th and 6th, a few yards down from the northeast corner with the four-foot polished stone patio walls of the MGM building to his back. There he breaks out his coffee (regular, with sugar), an orange, a sandwich (it looks like pastrami) and a Danish (of course). Perhaps the city humming around him, the sounds which have intrigued and inspired him for over twenty years, suggests a canon (he always composes in his head, never at

an instrument), or a couplet, so he punches quietly into his slate with the sharp stylus beneath his cloak—a Braille manuscript that a copier will later translate, at great expense too often, into notes or print. The winds whipping across the street from the East and Hudson rivers, together with the shadows covering the sidewalk as the sunlight is cut off by monoliths of glass and stone, make a second cup of coffee welcome. It is too early and too cold to open up his outer garments, yet he stands erect, a living piece of sculpture, ready to do business.

The crowds begin to pass by, old friends and voices, new acquaintances; he sells a little poetry, an old record or two, his perpetual calendar; he passes out broadsides and announcements. He is at this spot because it is at the center of an industry (ABC, CBS, NBC, MGM, studios, record stores, agencies, all situated within a few short city blocks) and because he loves the people here, loves to talk with them, not at them, to listen, to cherish the novelty of sounds, to seek out new wrinkles in the fabric of the human garment. They come, but not all of his visitors are friendly or knowledgeable: a class of New York City schoolchildren files past him on their way to a museum or Radio City, giggling in the anonymous safety of numbers. One straggler, a boy of about ten, delivers a parting burst: “You ain’t shit.” Moondog laughs, a booming, uninhibited baritone. To some hecklers, though, his response is less emphatic. One gentleman, baiting the Viking with digs about his peculiar dress, finally asks what the spear is all about. Moondog, annoyed that so much good time has been lost, retorts: “Why don’t you climb up on top of it, and maybe then you will get the point.”

Taxi drivers, truck drivers, secretaries from the surrounding offices, all send greetings. Nearly without fail he will recognize a voice out of the past. So acute is his sense of presence that many do not realize that he is blind; so down-to-earth is he with those who discuss less arcane matters with him that some are utterly unaware of his reputation as a composer and musician. Although he is wary of extending trust too far because he has been hurt in

the past, he is nonetheless unafraid to share his earnest ideas, even with those who deliberately seek him out to mock him and, through him, the naïve, eccentric idealists he is thought to personify. However rich his innermost life, he knows he is a spectacle and he is proud of the fierce vulnerability that distinguishes him from the hucksters and hustlers he knows too well.

It is now mid-morning: between visitors, coffee-breaks and routine sales—Moondog tries to have something for everybody—he will take a swig of grapefruit juice. “I like a drinking cup made from horn,” he has said; “it’s as old as man.” Since Moondog has no engagement tonight, no performance or appearance, he will stay at his spot for a good eight hours before packing it in. The sudden updrafts of wind cascading down the darkening Manhattan canyons can suddenly isolate him among a sea of faces. Underneath his tunic, however, he is patiently at work, clicking away. Composing in this way can be a very painful business: come winter, the bitter cold freezes the metal to the skin of his fingers. He cannot write in Braille with gloves on. In rain or snow, sometimes, he accidentally gouges the skin beneath his nails, an injury that is doubly troublesome: the same sensitive fingertips that write are also the ones that read and make music. Still, eyelids closed, as if in meditation, for minutes or longer, he works until a new voice apprehends him and fixes him in time and place once more.

Through lunchtime and on into the late afternoon he alternates among many roles: friend, oddball, composer, guru. Some come just to see him; others make sure they go that block or two out of the way to pass by; a few stumble upon him unaware and under-prepared. He is seldom flustered. Musicians pause to talk trade. A choreographer listens to him expound upon modern dance for half an hour. A couple of rockers improvise with Mr. Rhythm. On one such occasion, Big Brother and the Holding Company walked away with the madrigal “All Is Loneliness” and later recorded it, their lead singer, Janis Joplin, intoning Moondog’s dark sonorities with her own peculiar edginess. The only

thing they did not do, he notes wryly, is perform it in the 5/4 time in which it was written.

Toward dusk, a couple of college students come to hear Moondog on Vietnam and macro-economics. No stranger to these issues, nor to confrontation, he marries free speech movements on the campuses, the demonstrations against sending troops to south-east Asia and the imperial presidency into a dynamic, comic critique with eddies and undercurrents that answer some disturbing questions in some startling ways. He is sympathetic to their plight and to all the confused victims whose alienation he has sensed. He tells them how he, too, drifted away from family and faith, how he, too, came to loathe the abuse of power in high places, and he provides them with a lively counter-history of unacknowledged repression, immoral behind-the-scenes politics and an economic system armed for war. To them he is a vertical line in a world of horizontal planes, someone to be trusted even if he is not entirely credible. The violence implied by his costume is belied by his optimism. He was there, you can hear them saying, is there now; he *knows*. He sings with them a few of the songs they have come to identify with and a few of his own. A cynic might argue that this encounter was ephemeral in the long run, that little ultimately was changed by the noise and tears; nonetheless, few will easily forget this moment, even after they have hardened into middle age and, as one of the chroniclers of their generation has put it, fallen into place. It was not so much the role or the uniform that moved them, even if that was the reason they came. They will remember a strong yet sensitive man.

Then, soon after the last note dies, he is alone again. It is getting cold and he starts home, his gear in order, his burden shouldered. Too proud to use any of the standard paraphernalia of the blind, he walks upright and straight, though a couple of passers-by cross teeming Sixth Avenue with him. Back at the Aristo, he muses on the varied riches of the day: he made a few dollars, had a good time, broke no laws, avoided violence. His room is cold, but Moondog is used to the cold; in fact, he prefers

his walk-in closet to the overheated apartments his friends and admirers offer him. To the hardened veteran of Wyoming winters, a man accustomed to living on the streets and sleeping in places few ever visit, the Aristo is downright cozy. And so, as night falls, in the drifting movement of his consciousness toward sleep, he carves out yet another moment for his work, punching quietly in the unlit room, playing.

CD TRACK LISTING

- 1: Caribea (1:32)**
Performer/Composer: Moondog
- 2: To a Sea Horse (1:43)**
Performer/Composer: Moondog
- 3: Trees Against the Sky (.51)**
Performer/Composer: Moondog
- 4: Oo Debut (1:09)**
Performer/Composer: Moondog
- 5: Autumn (2:07)**
Performer/Composer: Moondog
- 6: Moondog Monologue (8:24)**
Performer/Composer: Moondog
- 7: Moondog's Theme (1:53)**
Performer/Composer: Moondog
- 8: Trimbas in Quarters (1:47)**
Performer/Composer: Moondog
- 9: I Came Into This World Alone (1:19)**
Performers: Moondog, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Jon Gibson
Composer: Moondog
- 10: Be a Hobo (1:22)**
Performers: Moondog, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Jon Gibson
Composer: Moondog
- 11: Why Spend the Dark Night With You (1:40)**
Performers: Moondog, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Jon Gibson
Composer: Moondog
- 12: All is Loneliness (1:38)**
Performers: Moondog, Steve Reich, Philip Glass, Jon Gibson
Composer: Moondog
- 13: Organ Rounds (2:04)**
Performer/Composer: Moondog
- 14: Canon in F Major, Book I (.43)**
Performer: Paul Jordan
Composer: Moondog
- 15: Canon in B Flat Major, Book III (1:36)**
Performer: Paul Jordan
Composer: Moondog
- 16: Canon in B Flat Major, Book I (.43)**
Performer: Paul Jordan
Composer: Moondog
- 17: Canon in B Flat Major, Book II (.28)**
Performer: Paul Jordan
Composer: Moondog
- 18: Canon in G Sharp Minor, Book I (.44)**
Performer: Paul Jordan
Composer: Moondog
- 19: Canon in C Sharp Minor, Book II (1:32)**
Performer: Paul Jordan
Composer: Moondog
- 20: 5/4 Snakebite Rattle (3:41)**
Performer: Stefan Lakatos
Composer: Moondog
- 21: Trimbas and Woodblock in 5/2 (1:26)**
Performer: Stefan Lakatos
Composer: Moondog
- 22: When I Am Deep in Sleep (2:17)**
Performer: Stefan Lakatos
Composer: Moondog
- 23: Rabbit Hop (2:25)**
Performer/Composer: Moondog
- 24: Dog Trot (2:25)**
Performer/Composer: Moondog
- 25: Bird's Lament (2:00)**
Performer/Composer: Moondog
- 26: Viking 1 (2:55)**
Performer/Composer: Moondog
- 27: Heimdall Fanfare (3:06)**
Performer/Composer: Moondog
- 28: Intro and Overtone Continuum (2:22)**
Performer/Composer: Moondog

Mastering by Pete Lyman of Infrasonic