

Making the Rounds

(1971–1974)

A blind man on the streets of New York is vulnerable, and Moondog was fortunate to survive intact for so long. Only minor pilfering and occasional brushes with the law blemished his performances around town; the day-to-day events of his life changed little, sometimes for years. Within the chaos around him he could hear the ephemeral melody when it came, and he often had to stop whatever he was doing to capture it in Braille, or it was “almost impossible to retrieve it without its sounding strained.” Back on the streets during winter 1970–71, with irregular stints in friends’ apartments, he was still the Viking, and the famous and the obscure engaged him at his station. Yet the same aura that made him nearly invulnerable to illness or gratuitous violence also gave his readings of people a charming disingenuousness. As customers passed, Moondog greeted warmly and argued heatedly, but all were equal to his ears: in his blindness he did not distinguish the importance of a voice, only its quality.

Through the two years between Columbia albums Moondog slept where he worked. A marvel of fortitude to his friends, he endured his last two winters in New York without a cold. Whenever he was not at Candor, or indoors, he would curl up after the theatres were dark at the well-lit bank on the ground floor of the MGM building on the corner of 55th and 6th, under the circumstances a most secure spot. A continual stream of customers visited

the all-night depository, and concerned friends including a nearby doorman kept a vigilant eye on him. He always woke up whole in the morning. Sometimes the staff at the Warwick Hotel brought him coffee and a danish. At 5:00 a.m. he would go into the Joy Deli, 105 West 55th, as he had regularly for years, to get his rousing breakfast of a quarter-pound of pastrami, rolls, coffee, cruller, orange, and more. He remembered the “friendly Greeks” there with the “fondest regards.”

One evening in April of 1971, at his station, two familiar voices greeted him: Mary and June. It had been over a decade since they had spoken, and June was now almost eighteen. They could not have predicted that their coming together that spring would culminate in their collaboration on an LP. Mary performed on his first and last American albums, and June had been serenaded as an infant on the first and sang with her father on the last. Nor could they have predicted that, after May 1972, when Moondog toured the Midwest and then moved up to Candor, they would never see each other again, or even keep in touch after a few more letters. Their relationship, so strange, so strained, so compellingly creative, is a chapter in Moondog’s life that reads like bad fiction. For him, however, so used to the bizarre, it was another unexpected illumination. The moment burned brightly, briefly.

But that spring day was a reunion in the fullest sense of the word, extinguishing the buried rancor of years. First they had a long talk over coffee and sandwiches. June, who was attending the New York School for Performing Arts (in the days before *Fame*), told her father that her fellow students were “raving about that man Moondog and his music.” (An analogous moment: when his mother heard from his brother’s daughter—whom he never met—that her uncle had just released an album on Columbia, she said that the family had always considered Louis “an early bloomer,” an observation they had never shared with Louis. He heard the story in the letter informing him of his mother’s death, shortly afterwards.)

Although June did not admit that he was her father, she did ask her mother to re-establish a relationship. Mary agreed, having

recently broken up with the man she had lived with since the separation in 1960, and the old nuclear bond formed again. They invited him to visit, perhaps even to stay with them, and he did, off and on during the spring, after they moved into the Viking House (of course) on the upper west side, not far from Columbia University. Perhaps because he always felt as if he were “roasting” in their overheated apartment, he invited them up for a May weekend at Candor, but they still didn’t like roughing it (the flies, the wood smoke, outdoor cooking, primitive facilities without running water...). They would always be, he said wryly, “city girls.” By summer, after completion of the recording of *Moondog 2*, he was sharing an apartment on the ninth floor of the Viking House with a young man, a fellow traveler who offered daily sacrifices to the Norse gods on an altar like Moondog’s in Candor. Here he stayed until May 1972, when he left the city for good.

The family’s initial weeks together were busy and fruitful, for the timing of their newly defined relationship was lucky. Even though it did not appear until December of 1971, the second album for Columbia was recorded in May. Immediately June and Mary were included; Moondog taught them to play percussion parts, mostly eight-bar patterns. June also learned the vocal parts in a mere two weeks: Moondog was not only pleased by her sense of timing (“she had me standing on my toes”) but also by the quality of her voice (“so full, without vibrato, and in tune”). In light of some hitches they encountered, and some strong disagreements, the sessions went quickly. The “madrigal album,” as it is sometimes called, was performed largely in the Columbia east side studios at 50th Street, though parts were done at the Old Church where *Moondog* had been recorded, and which he loved for its excellent acoustics.

In retrospect, the delightful album finally released as *Moondog 2* had a poor chance, despite its favorable reception. Just before the recording session, Al Brown and Moondog had several skirmishes. Moondog had hired his old friend Sam Ulano as second drummer. Sam, who had played duets with him on the Prestige albums and in concert, was able to read his rhythms. Al fired Sam without informing

anyone about it, and Moondog walked in to find another drummer in the studio who couldn't read the rhythms. What had been painstakingly worked out note by note had to be "improvised." The cheery program notes euphemistically call this procedure "superimposed ad lib percussion." Moondog was no stranger to performers who struggled with his music, of course, and Sam complained to the union and to Columbia, but the only result was that he got paid several thousand dollars for his rehearsal time out of Moondog's expense account. Though "put out by this," Moondog went along with the change once the pressure point was passed. But then Al made a pass at June, who snubbed him, and he was put out by that. In retaliation, it seems, Mr. Brown, who was black, returned after the incident with two white girls, one on either arm (for years he had promoted black-white combinations in the acts he sponsored and booked). Through their association in the late 1960s, through concerts and recordings, this "prince of a man" did more for Moondog than any other professional musician in his entire career. But when Moondog's material merely suggested possibilities for Al's unique interest in mixed groups, the two men had to go their separate ways. Mr. Brown wanted two black girls and two white men (to sing the four proposed parts of the madrigals) on the cover of the album. Imagine his shock when he discovered father and daughter were to be the only singers. Imagine his even greater surprise when some of Moondog's earlier unconventional views on "ethnic purity" filtered back to him. It seems his (white) girlfriend interviewed Moondog and got direct answers. We do not know what he was asked nor what he answered, but what seems with hindsight to have been the inevitable breakup accelerated. On the whole affair Moondog commented, "Although he puts miscegenation before art, I am beholden to him for all he did for me, before and after the recording."

In addition to the bickering about the performances, there was a major rift between principles of production: Mr. Guercio, certain that this album was a far more modest package than the first, knew that it would not be "classical" in any sense. He suggested electronically

amplified instruments. (Since Mr. Guercio later refused to discuss the Columbia Moondog records, his intentions remain obscure. Did he intend to bring Moondog closer to the mainstream all along? Did he really care about the nature of Moondog's music or only about its potential audience?) Moondog adamantly refused, writing in the program notes that "all the instruments used in the record are acoustical." The most "modern" instruments were the piano, celesta, and guitar; with them appeared an early prototype of Moondog's troubadour harp, pipe organ, virginal (harpsichord), recorder, and viola da gamba. Electronics, he observes, are "disquieting." He was moving in other directions: "With this recording of Book I it is hoped a new trend may be set in motion, and it is hoped that many will be turned on listening to, and then performing, rounds." Further, he practically admitted that this music was unclassifiable, a departure not only from his first Columbia album but also from anything popular: "If this music has anything to do with rock, you might say that this is what became of rock, rock gone classical or rock come of age." It is not easy to forge new categories, however, and like so many fine innovations that simply do not catch on, his concept of a hybrid form was not successful despite the effort and the praise.

Not all the news was bad, and the creative vision and the fine performances lifted hopes high. His main player, Kay Jaffee (recorder, harpsichord, and organ) was "tops." "I never had a better player." Gillian Stephens played a composition on the troubadour harp that he composed for her. (Moondog was so impressed by her performance that he dedicated a booklet of pieces for troubadour harp to her.) June and Mary were with him. But more important than the activity was that this recording of the madrigals freed him from lingering unfulfilled expectations. He had written his first rounds in 1950 ("In late winter or early spring, in a doorway on Fifty-first Street, between Seventh Avenue and Broadway") but had all but abandoned them after "nothing much happened." Later that year he completed Book I and was selling it on the streets. His twenty-year devotion to the form would finally get its due: its test and its exposure.