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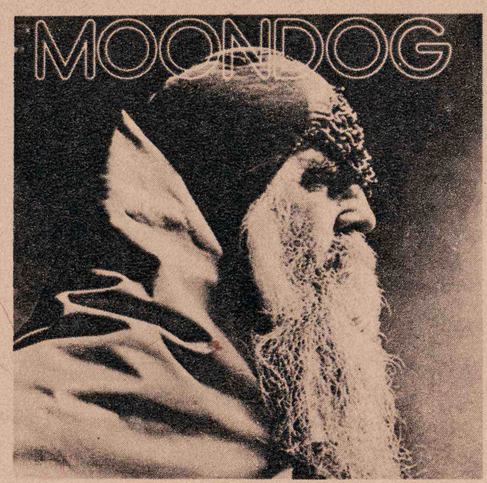
Rochester's List Family, Page 11

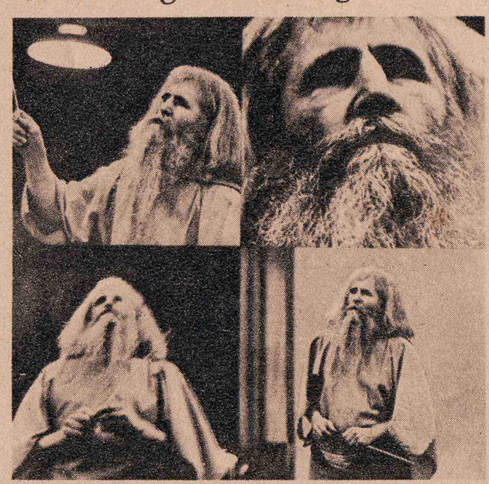
Winter in Upstate, Page 19

Cover: Moondog, Page 4

Photographs by
TALIS BERGMANIS



Moondog in costume is shown on cover of his Columbia Records album, above, and layout inside shows him conducting at recording session.



Upstate hermit, Manhattan composer, blind Viking poet, he's . . .

Moondog

By STEVE KNOWLTON

Holding a spoonful of sugar poised over the coffee cup on the counter, Marcella looked up and said, "Two sugars and a little milk, right?"

Moondog sat in the booth at Lela's Restaurant, exactly 60 steps

down North Street in Owego from the cigar store where the New York bus stops. A smile flashed from under his immense beard and he answered, "Yes, that's right." Then, "See, she remembers. That's Marcella. Her mother, Lela, owns this little place."

The waitress brought the coffee over to the straight-backed wooden booth and put it down in front of the massive man looking like a Viking out of an old Kirk Douglas movie.

"I come here a lot," said Moondog, "particularly in the summertime when there's not this problem with the snow. I sit and talk for hours and sometimes just listen to the old-timers come and go. Fascinating old people. Listen and talk — until it's time to go back."

He felt for the cup and took a sip, stuffing large bunches of beard under his chin out of the way.

His left hand disappeared under his army blanket tunic into a leather pouch and produced a yellow plastic drinking straw with a flexible elbow. Moondog sipped the coffee and explained, "if I had a moustache cup ... but I don't and a straw is easier to carry around."

Officially, Moondog's name is Louis Hardin, born in Maryville, Kansas, in 1916, the son of an Episcopal minister. But under the layers of tattered Viking garb and the shaggy grey beard, Moondog is ageless, placeless, has no history you can connect with calendar or map.

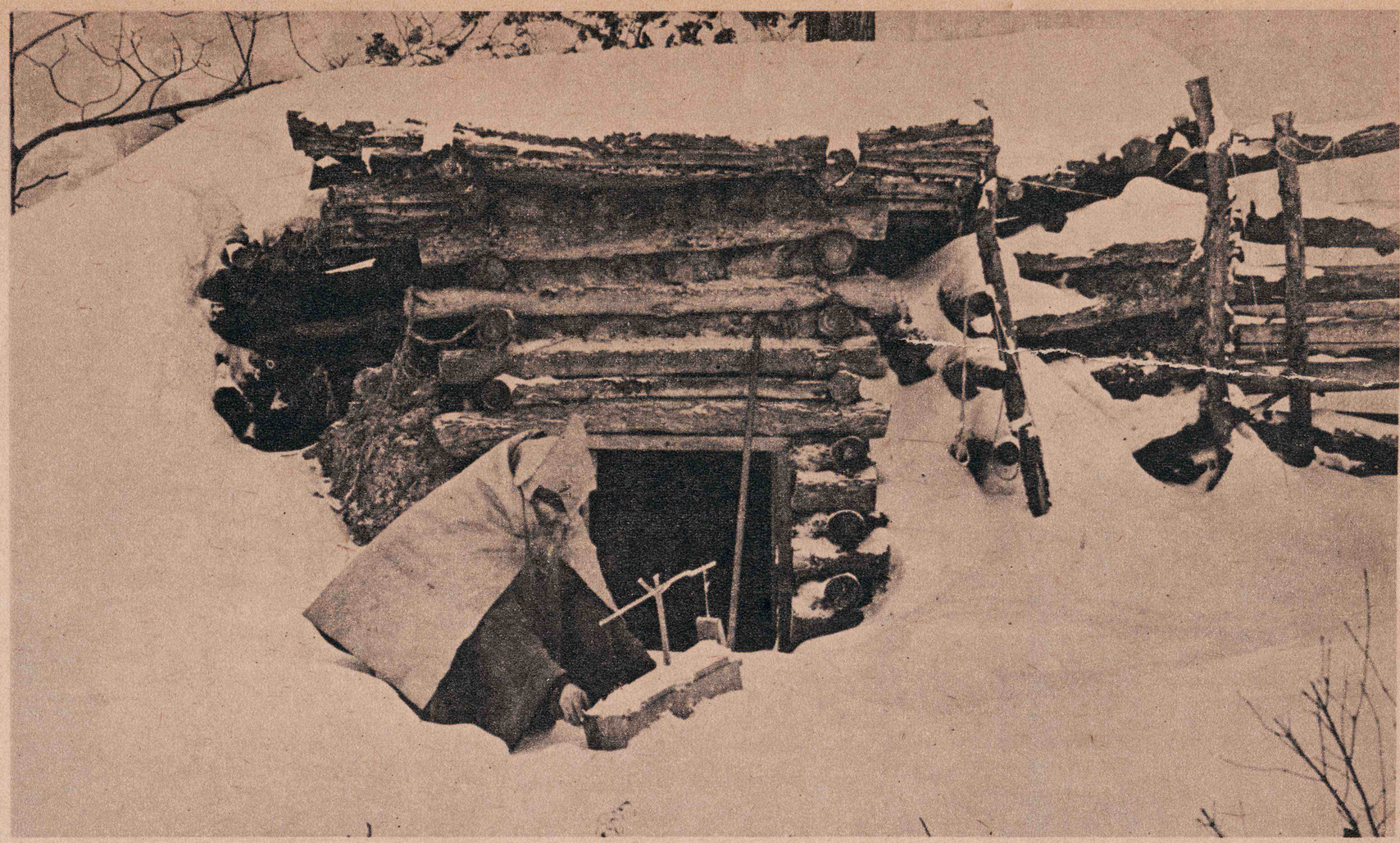
Moondog picked his pen name from the memory of an old dog he once owned back in Missouri. It used to howl at the moon, naturally.

By his own admission, he is a "hustler" — panhandler — in New York on 6th Avenue, usually in the middle Fifties. He peddles his poems and songs at ten cents a mimeographed sheet and uses all he can save up to travel back and forth to his hillside two miles or so from Candor, about 25 miles below Ithaca, eight miles from the bus stop outside the cigar store in Owego.

In 1956, after 13 years in New York, Moondog had $750 all at once and bought 40 acres on a hill a thousand miles from anywhere for what would be called a retreat if he had a good job and any money.

He and a neighbor who lives down the hill half a mile or so put up a one room sod and stone shack, "but somebody, I guess some of the kids before they got to know me, kept taking the sod out from between the stones and it got cold in the winter. And then, the mice could get in."

So a few years later, about 1961, Moondog and another neighbor put up the 8-foot by 16-foot cabin he now has. It's insulated with tarpaper between the 2x4's and heated with a wood stove that takes up about half the room.



Moondog sets a rabbit trap in front of old log hut, his first home. Now he lives in a box-like tarpaper shanty nearby.

A bed is built into one of the short walls and on the other end is a pile of tunics and leather Viking helmets and all the other junk that Moondog has collected since he came east for the last time 27 years ago.

The nearest road to Moondog's place hasn't been plowed all winter, so there are several feet of snow on it and the best way to get to the cabin is the way Moondog does it — on snowshoes.

When you make it through the drifts and get to the door, Moondog greets you warmly — much warmer than the inside of the cabin — and offers to take down the piece of cheesecloth over the single window so you can see your way around.

On a little wooden table near the bed is an old skillet. A fork lies in the middle of the pan, left over from Moondog's last meal, whenever it was. A few empty and a few unopened cans are stacked and piled up together behind the frying pan.

At the front edge of the table a one-foot square space has been cleared away and it's here that he sits and writes his poetry, mostly couplets — iambic septameter — and composes his music.

For Moondog, that one square foot is about it for work space because that's all there is in the shack, and the inside of the 8 by 16 foot shack is about it for living space. When he's in New York, he sleeps in doorways, sidewalks, anyplace that's not occupied and is out of the elements.

Passersby rush past Moondog as he stands at his panhandling post in front of the CBS building in midtown Manhattan.

"But it's better now," he says, "Last year a friend who owns a leather shop gave me a key and after the people leave at night, I can go in there and sleep on the floor.

"I do some composing there too, but it's hard. After being out all day and then going inside where it's so nice and warm, I get awfully sleepy," he says, a little embarrassed.

For years he has sat there knocking out lyrics and music which is said to sound like early Donovan. Or rather, "since I was first, you should say Donovan sounds like me," says Moondog with a chuckle down under his beard.

But his real love is classical music. A melody line comes in on him "like an elusive butterfly and you have to write it down then or it's almost impossible to retrieve it without its sounding strained."

The melody "is the easy part," he says. "Then comes the real nitty-gritty work of composing" — the hours and weeks of writing out the parts to the piece, for the percussions, woodwinds, brass, strings, because Moondog thinks real music should be written for full orchestras, not two guitars, an electric bass and drums.

After the inspiration comes, Moondog jots down the melody line and works out the parts, using something like a thumbtack to poke little holes into cards, forming the braille pattern that looks to the uninitiated

Continued on Page 6

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MOONDOG

Continued from Page 5

like someone walked all over them in golf shoes.

Then comes the work of the reader and copier—Moondog reads the notes out to a friend, the fingers of his rough lumberjack's hands moving amazingly deftly along the cards. The copier takes it all down in standard musical notation—the language of the sighted.

Standing around the stove, or sitting in Lela's or squatting on the sidewalk on 6th Avenue, Moondog will talk for hours on almost any subject you suggest, but history and his own brand of religion are his favorites.

The obvious question of why the Viking look starts a long story. When he was 16 and living in Hurley, Missouri, a dynamite cap exploded in his face and permanently blinded him.

"I thought that if the God my father preached about was good, He wouldn't have let it happen to me. And if He was all-powerful, but had been looking the other way and not watching at the time, He would have restored my sight. But He did neither and I lost my faith."

From there, Moondog wandered from Braille school to Braille school, reading, listening, thinking about things, eventually arriving at the Norse gods of the Vikings; Vikings of his own heritage.

There is a little stone monument outside the cabin on the hill outside Candor where he burns half a cigar as incense for the Norse god, Odin, and smokes the other half himself.

"I'm very conscious of my ethnic background," he says, gripping a Viking spear which both proves his point and supplants a red-tipped cane. "And I think everyone else should be.

The appearance, the style are "a personal expression, a rebellion against the bourgeois uniform, as I call it, and a rebellion against my parents, I suppose, in that order."

The not knowing where his mother is — "somewhere in Missouri, I think." The brother who's a doctor somewhere who never answered Moondog's last letter three or four years ago. The note from his stepmother saying his father "is dead and buried."

"They didn't invite me to the funeral. Even in death, they wouldn't forget the appearance." Then, with a forced almost-laugh, "But you could say that even in death I wouldn't forget the appearance," spreading his arms to show you what he meant.

Moondog trudges down the country road from his shack in the hills of Tompkins County to the bus stop.

Does he belong in the East Village, surrounded by the hundreds of young people with similar backgrounds?

"Young people are often drawn to me," he says, "but I'm not necessarily drawn to them. For example, I want nothing to do with anyone who takes drugs of any kind, even marijuana."

People high on grass "are very introspective and very contemplative, which is good," he says, "but all they do is think. They can't conquer mountains because the marijuana has killed the incentive, the drive.

"I can't put up with anyone who doesn't do anything," he says.

People at the Columbia Records watched him out on the streets under their windows for years, Moondog says, and they got to know him, to know that he composes symphonic pieces along with the folk music and the poems.

Six months or so ago, Moondog got together with the Columbia and agreed to cut an album of Moondog music. The record of eight symphonic pieces made it to number 6 on the classical charts before Christmas and then fell off.

"But Lenny (Leonard Bernstein) preceded me down, so that's good," Moondog says, starting into a long personal feud with Bernstein starting 20 years or more ago when Moondog says Bernstein slighted him.

Money from the album sales hasn't come in yet, he says. He got some at the beginning, but royalties are only given out twice a year and it

Sitting in booth in Owego restaurant, Moondog eats a snack while waiting for the New York bus.

isn't time yet for the first check.

If any is forthcoming, and Moondog is hopeful but not overly optimistic about it, "I think I'd have some electricity put in the shack on the hill.

"Tending the stove is all right, but it's awfully time-consuming when it's really cold and I can't really concentrate on my composing. An electric heater would be nice."

Beyond that, if he really makes it big — "I've got at least ten more albums full of music already written. —" Moondog would like to go to Europe. "I've always considered myself a 'European in exile'" he says although he's never been to Europe. "I never had the money," a little sadly.

Lela is working now and Marcella, bundled up for the snow, has left the restaurant.

She brings more coffee — two sugars, a little milk — over to the booth. In a minute, the oversize, cumbersome cash register rings up $1.10 for lunch from one of the old timers who hang out there, particularly in the wintertime.

"Hear that?" says Moondog, and his shaggy head cocks to one side. A smile from under the beard again and he says, "you don't see cash registers like that anymore. Doesn't it sound nice?" It's about two feet high and is a dirty brown, isn't it?"

Although he's been sightless for almost 40 years, Moondog still thinks very much in visual terms and he starts talking about the prettiest girl he ever saw, just a few months before the accident —blonde hair, grey eyes, a complexion like ivory.

It's about 4:30 and at 4:55 the bus leaves for New York, back to the hustling, the crowds, the sleeping in doorways. And a little money. Maybe word from the Columbia people that the album has taken another upswing for some unexplainable reason. Maybe by next week, Europe will be a little closer.

The right hand dips into another pouch hidden by the tunics and comes out with a quarter. "I think we should leave a little tip," says Moondog and flips the coin onto the table.

The album, entitled "Moondog" with a color picture of a gnarled old Viking on the cover is standing on top of the cash register. Lela smiles and tells Moondog that it's there.

He smiles and thanks her and sure, he'll be back pretty soon. It's out into the blowing snow again, a leather sack under one arm, the spear in the other.

Twenty-two steps back up the street, he's talking about the album again. "The only way I would agree to do it was to not let Columbia hear it before it was recorded," Moondog says. "That doesn't happen very much in this day and age."

A few steps of silence, musing.

"Rare is the man who isn't bought," says Moondog. Forty-six.

At fifty-two, "It's the next doorway. Just a little shop; sells cigars and candy and like that. But they've got my record. The man who owns the store says he's got in a whole shipment of the album. Look, see if they don't." They do.

Fifty-eight, fifty-nine, sixty. Stop.

"No, don't wait. The bus might be late. It was last time and the roads are getting bad I bet. You'd better be off."

He's standing there, the leather sack on the ground beside him. Ten dollars and twenty cents turned into a one-way ticket from Owego to New York City.

In the swirling snow and soft darkness folding in on him, he waits, the spear in his right hand, one end on the ground.

An engine rumbles. "Is that the bus? No, just a truck. Never mind. It'll be along any minute."

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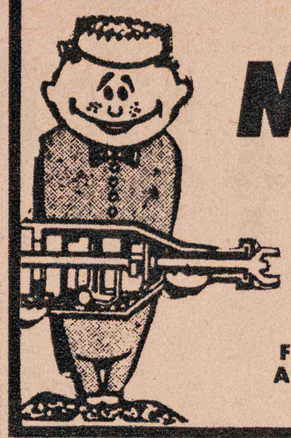

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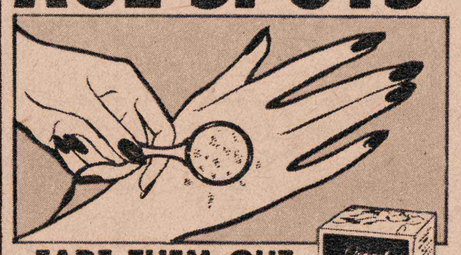

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