

'Just enough' Moondog

Retrospective on outsider works despite a bit too much passion.

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Can Moondog survive his own mystique?

More discussed than heard, Moondog has become a paragon of outsider music. Blind since he was a teenager and influenced equally by 1950s jazz and Native American music, the Kansas-born Louis Thomas Hardin (1916-1999) evolved into a Viking-garbed New York City street musician who named himself after a dog that barked at the moon, and created music that felt like the unmediated, pure expression of a (possibly) holy fool. Or so we think.

Bowerbird was destined to produce a Moondog retrospective concert, and did so with its just-formed Arcana New Music Ensemble on Friday at the Rotunda in University City with every seat filled. A photo of Moondog's latter-day-Odin visage graced the program; I would have also enjoyed hearing a recording of him recite the circular aphorisms of his street poetry that, like his music, seems like profound doggerel. Example: "Each today is yesterday's tomorrow, which is now."

Only music was heard, some of it in arrangements — defensible because street musicians are accustomed to giving up control over how they're heard. The first handful of selections, "Bird's Lament," "Oasis," and "Rue Lette" were charming, short-



Moondog
played on New York streets.

breathed miniatures played by harp, flute, and other non-aggressive instruments. Like many outsiders, Moondog wasn't radical but used conventional means in unconventional ways, his Native American music and 1950s jazz influences incorporated with natural ease. One trademark is complex cross-rhythms that feel ritualistic, but make you want to dance.

"Marimba Mondo" for percussion showed why Steve Reich admits to Moondog influence: The music is intensely contrapuntal, though with the individual melodic strands splintered and scattered in ways that involve as much strategy as inspiration. No wonder this eccentric figure was, in his own time, defended as a serious artist.

Like Erik Satie's, the music is gentle and naive and has a resigned sense of loneliness, which is why the heat that Arcana brought to the performances, while appreciated, departed from the mild manner of Moondog's recordings. Passionate advocacy is laudable, but outsider music serves listeners secondarily. The question is what listeners can find in Moondog's gently earnest musings. He must be met more than halfway. My own conclusion: Moondog was a fascinating footnote, a time capsule of sorts, but Bowerbird's one-hour concert was just enough.