

Louis (Moondog) Hardin, 83, Musician, Dies

By GLENN COLLINS

The gaunt, blind musician known as Moondog, who was celebrated among New Yorkers for two decades as a mysterious and extravagantly garbed street performer but who went on to win acclaim in Europe as an avant-garde composer, conducting orchestras before royalty, died Wednesday in a hospital in Münster, Germany. He was 83.

The cause was heart failure, said a friend, Ilona Sommer.

Day in and day out, the man who was originally named Louis T. Hardin was as taciturn and unchanging a landmark of the midtown Manhattan streetscape as the George M. Cohan statue in Duffy Square. From the late 1940's until the early 1970's, Mr. Hardin stood at attention like a sentinel on Avenue of the Americas around 54th Street.

No matter the weather, he invariably dressed in a homemade robe, sandals, a flowing cape and a horned Viking helmet, the tangible expression of what he referred to as his "Nordic philosophy." At his side he clutched a long spear of his own manufacture.

Most of the passers-by who dismissed him as "the Viking of Sixth Avenue," offering him contributions and buying copies of his music and poetry, were unaware that he had recorded his music on the CBS, Prestige, Epic, Angel and Mars labels. Mr. Hardin's jazz-accented compositions, generally scored for small wind and percussion ensembles, often achieved a flowing, tonal symphonic style.

One of his songs, "All Is Loneliness," became a hit when recorded by Janis Joplin. He wrote music for radio and television commercials, and one of his compositions was used on the soundtrack for the 1972 movie "Drive, He Said," with Jack Nicholson.

Along the way, Mr. Hardin wrote Bohemian broadsides against government regimentation, the world monetary system and organized religion. He was celebrated by Beat Generation poets and late-1960's flower children. His passionate unconventionality drew praise from some critics and led to interviews on many television shows, including both "Today" and "The Tonight Show."

Although many New Yorkers assumed that he had died after he vanished from his customary post in 1974, Mr. Hardin had actually been invited to perform his music in West Germany and decided to stay.

"He led an extraordinary life for a blind man who came to New York with no contacts and a month's rent, and who lived on the streets of New York for 30 years," said Dr. Robert Scotto, a professor of English at Baruch College of the City University of

New York. "Without question, he was the most famous street person of his time, a hero to a generation of hippies and flower children." Dr. Scotto has just completed a biography of Mr. Hardin, "Moondog: The Viking of Sixth Avenue," which has not been published.

After his performances in Hamburg, Mr. Hardin again earned a living as a street performer, this time in Europe. He soon met Mrs. Sommer, whose father insisted on taking him into their home and supported Mr. Hardin in his later years.

'He was the most famous street person of his time, a hero to a generation.'

He composed in Braille, and she transcribed his music and acted as his publisher and business manager. According to Dr. Scotto, they had an intimate working relationship, but neither of them ever described it as more than that.

In his later years, Mr. Hardin produced at least five albums in Europe, including a "sound saga" titled "The Creation," and regularly performed his compositions with chamber and symphony orchestras before glittering audiences in Paris, Stockholm and cities in Germany.

Mr. Hardin adopted the Moondog name in 1947, identifying himself, he said, with a former pet who howled at the moon.

He was born in Maryville, Kan., on May 26, 1916, the son of an Episcopal minister. He was blinded at the age of 16 when a dynamite blasting cap exploded in his hands. A year later, after studying stringed instruments, organ and harmony at the Iowa School for the Blind, he became obsessed with becoming a composer.

When he arrived in Manhattan in 1943, he established an outpost outside the stage entrance of Carnegie Hall and met some of the New York Philharmonic's musicians. They arranged a meeting with their conductor, Artur Rodzinski. Mr. Rodzinski was taken with Mr. Hardin and not only extended an open invitation to attend the orchestra's rehearsals, but also promised he would conduct an orchestral work if Mr. Hardin ever wrote one.

But because he was blind, he needed help in writing out the score. Mr. Hardin could not afford such assistance, so he made his living as a street musician, training himself to be a master of percussion improvisa-

tion. He was unable to compose a symphony until after Mr. Rodzinski left the Philharmonic in 1947.

In the mid-1950's, one of his 78-r.p.m. recordings, "Moondog Symphony," was regularly played by Alan Freed, the pioneering rock-and-roll disk jockey. But it wasn't until the 1960's that Mr. Hardin had regular access to an orchestra and was able to make his first longer album for CBS, "Moondog."

In 1989, Mr. Hardin, acclaimed in Europe, was invited back to the United States to conduct the Brooklyn Philharmonic Chamber Orchestra.

Allan Kozinn, a critic for The New York Times, described Mr. Hardin's conducting style as unusual, explaining that he was "uncomfortable with being an authority figure, so he sits to the side of the orchestra and provides the beat on a bass drum or tympani."

Dr. Scotto said that Mr. Hardin told him that he married in 1943 and subsequently divorced. A second marriage, to Szukko Whiteing, a musician, in the 1950's, ended in divorce in the early 1960's, Dr. Scotto said.

Dr. Scotto and Mrs. Sommer said they thought Mr. Hardin was survived by a younger brother, Creighton Hardin, of Kansas City; a daughter, June Hardin, and another daughter, whose name and whereabouts they did not know.

In the end, Mr. Hardin finally yielded to Mrs. Sommer's coaxing and gave up his Viking outfits. He had refused to alter his dress code even when, as an aspiring composer, it provoked his eviction from the Philharmonic rehearsals.

"But I still love horned helmets and swords and spears," he said in a 1989 interview. "I like to feel that I'm loyal to my past. I wouldn't want to be on the street anymore. But you know, that led to a lot of things."



Louis (Moondog) Hardin in 1965, at 54th Street and Avenue of the Americas, his favorite spot from the late 1940's through the early 1970's.

Allyn Baum/The New York Times