

# WHENCE COMETH MOONDOGGIE

*"Billy Al Bengston was 'Moondoggie'—but that's history."*

—TERRY "TUBESTEAK" TRACY, SAN CLEMENTE, CA, 2001

BY  
BRIAN L.  
GILLOGLY

In the middle of an interview with Rabbit Kekai for the documentary *Accidental Icon: The Real Gidget Story*, Kathy "Gidget" Zuckerman extemporaneously sauntered into frame, gently embraced the Hawaiian surf legend, and whispered, "My Moondoggie." It was affectionate jest from a friend and the very gal who inspired the *Gidget* novel, movies, and TV shows, and he took it well. After all, Rabbit had taught Deborah Walley to surf for her lead role in Columbia's 1961 feature *Gidget Goes Hawaiian*, and Moondoggie was the love interest of the fictional Gidget. As uninvited tags go, certainly this one was pretty tame. Yet the tangled roots of the word, which reach back at least a decade before the coming-of-age novel, give it a quasi-heroic birth far beyond the shores of Malibu's Surfrider Beach.

Louis "Moondog" Hardin, born in 1916 in Marysville, Kansas, would eventually be heralded a pioneer of the avant-garde minimalist music movement, best known for the work of composer Philip Glass. Hardin, the son of an Episcopal minister, enjoyed early exposure to Blackfoot tribal music, characterized by flute and drums. At age 16, after losing his eyesight in a blasting cap accident, he learned to play a variety of instruments and went on to take conservatory training.

In New York during the early '40s, he developed his own musical theory, compositions, and makeshift instruments, and began playing on the street for income and exposure. Noted conductor Arthur Rodzinski became a friend and admirer of Hardin, although much of the musical establishment rejected him for his outlandish appearance. Hardin's signature long hair, beard, and Viking helmet with horns reportedly came from his fascination with Norse mythology.



The girl midget, regaling her pals with stories of that dreamy Moondoggie.

By 1947, Hardin had taken to using the handle "Moondog" in remembrance of a dog "who used to howl at the moon more than any dog I knew," and perhaps due to its Native American flavor. In the early '50s, Cleveland rock-and-roll radio DJ Alan Freed played Hardin's "Moondog Symphony" as his theme song and actually took to calling himself "Moondog" until Hardin objected and brought a lawsuit. Moondog's 1953 "Surf Session" was more auditory chaos than surf music, but nonetheless an interesting prelude to what came next.

By the mid-'50s, Hardin's music was embraced by the Beat community and some of it was on vinyl with photos of the musician on the album covers or in the liner notes. At this same time, Malibu surfer Billy Al Bengston was a student at Otis Art Institute in L.A. He recalls being dubbed "Moondog" by Peter Voulkos, a friend and mentor at school. Bengston had just returned from Baja and was longhaired, bearded, and playing the flute at Otis when Voulkos made the off-the-cuff "Moondog" remark.

"Voulkos was the most dominant person I've ever known in my life," says Bengston. "As a ceramicist he was

Billy Al Bengston—Moondoggie—humming and strumming at Malibu, 1955.





probably the most influential artist of this time in L.A. He could have called me ‘shithead’ and I would have taken it.”

(A variation on the story has it that Terry “Tubesteak” Tracy, the inspiration for the Kahuna in *Gidget*, along with surfer/artist Ken Price came up with “Moondog” for Bengston after seeing Hardin’s photo at a record store in Santa Monica.)

Bengston, however, preferred the diminutive “Moondoggie,” adopting it as his nom de surf. Longtime Southern California surfer “Mysto” George Carr points out that “the Waikiki beach boys all had nicknames like Blackout, Slap, Rabbit, and Gabby, so the kids along the California beaches started picking up nicknames, too.” Thus, the tribe at the ‘Bu included “The Lump,” “Beetle,” “Spike,” “Whitewater,” and possibly someone called “Boondoggie,” because he preferred to sack out in the chaparral rather than on the beach.

*“Does anybody want to know what really happened in the shack?—Nothing!”*

—KATHY “GIDGET” ZUCKERMAN,  
CORONADO HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION, SAN DIEGO, CA, 2001

In 1956, 15-year-old Kathy Kohner befriended the Malibu crew, learned to surf, and was christened “Gidget,” combining “girl and midget.” Early on she was aware of the unique nature of her story and wanted it told, which her dad, screenwriter Frederick Kohner, made possible via the 1957 novel *Gidget*. Some of the colorful language she had brought home from the beach, including “kahuna” and “bitchin’,” migrated into the book.

Though she had minimal contact with Bengston, the name “Moondoggie” was assigned to the love interest of the fictional Gidget, probably just because Frederick Kohner liked the sound of it. Kathy doubts that her father ever heard of “Moondog” Hardin, so the term arrived without extra baggage.

Kathy Zuckerman notes that while her father’s best-selling novel touched a nerve, the first movie created a groundswell, especially with Sandra Dee in the lead. “If it wasn’t for Dee we might not have had this enormous response,” Kathy admits. Yet Darren’s Moondoggie, the conflicted surfer/college student, deserves some of the credit. At singing engagements across the country, actor James Darren still gets his biggest response when he performs the Gidget song he first sang to Dee in the Kahuna’s hut. Muses Darren, “An actor simply plays a role and people fall in love with the character.” 159







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