

# on the lighter side



Harpo Marx

## Harpo Marx

by Carrol McLaughlin

“His trademark was his harp, which he played well, and his silence, which was funnier, sweeter and more eloquent than most comedians’ noisiest chatter.” This quote, from page one of the *New York Times*, 29 September 1964, captures the essence of the great Harpo Marx.

Harpo loved the harp, and practiced faithfully three hours per day—even after retiring. He also played the clarinet and the piano, often incorporating those instruments into his act. Harpo’s repertoire on the harp included Salzedo’s *Chanson dans la Nuit*, Zabel’s *La Source* and Ravel’s *Introduction et Allegro*.

Because Harpo did not read music, he was never able to play the *Introduction et Allegro* with orchestra. He had learned the piece by ear—with certain rhythmic liberties. Harpo also had a large repertoire of popular and jazz music, learned by ear or written out especially for Harpo by his son, Bill.

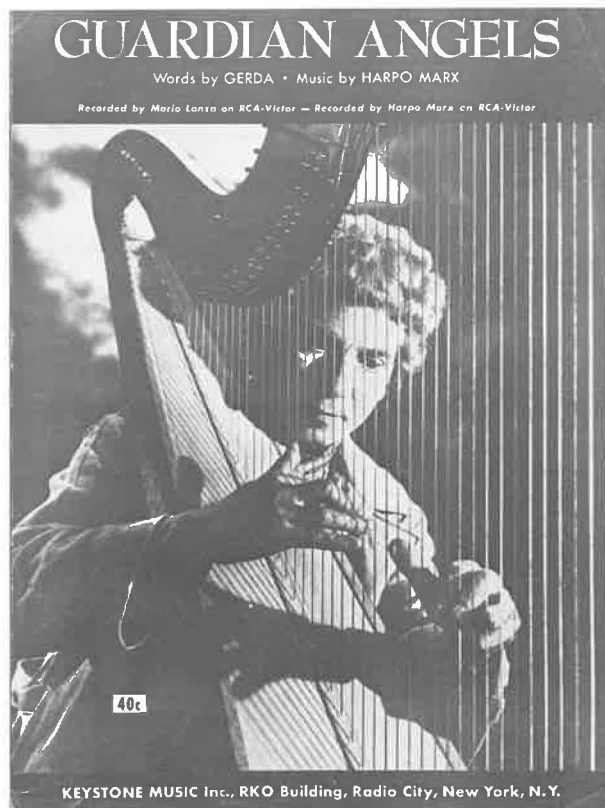
Bill, a Los Angeles composer who has recently written a concerto for harp and orchestra, devised a special method of notation for his father. He would write out the letter names of the notes of a piece Harpo wanted to learn. If the melody rose, Bill would place the letter higher on the page. Each note of a left-hand chord would be spelled out. Harpo and Bill collaborated on Harpo’s two solo harp albums, *Harpo In Hi-Fi* (1957) and *Harpo at Work* (1959), both released by Mercury Records.

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Harpo’s first accomplishment on the harp was to play “oom-chunk-chunks” in accompaniment to the Four Nightingales, the name of one of the Marx Brothers’ early singing groups. The harp he started on had belonged to his grandmother, who had played harp on the German Vaudeville circuit while touring with her husband, a ventriloquist.

In his autobiography, *Harpo Speaks*, Harpo recalls that he spent the first two years playing with the harp on his left shoulder: the mistake was discovered when he saw a picture of an angel playing a harp in a department store window. Harpo subsequently studied with the late Mildred Dilling, whom he considered his closest friend in the harp world. He was also greatly influenced by swing harpist Gail Laughton.

One of the first big successes of the Marx Brothers was *I’ll Say She Is* at the Casino Theatre in New York in 1924. The show was reviewed by the famous Alexander Woollcott, who became Harpo’s closest friend. He began his



The cover of Harpo’s song which was recorded by Mario Lanza and by himself

review with the headline, “Harpo Marx and Some Brothers . . .,” and was particularly impressed by “that sly, un-

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## TENDERLY

The image shows a handwritten musical score for the piece "Tenderly". It consists of two staves: a treble clef staff for guitar and a bass clef staff for bass. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats) and the time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into four measures. Above the guitar staff, the chords are written as Bb, C, Eb, D, Bb, C, F, D, Bb, Gb. Above the bass staff, the chords are G, D, G, Bb, Eb, Gb, Eb, Ab, Gb, Eb, Ab. The notation includes stems and beams for the notes, and the piece concludes with a double bar line.

An example of music Harpo could "read," prepared by his son Bill

expected, magnificent comic among the Marxes, who is recorded somewhere on a birth certificate as Adolph, but who is known to the adoring two-a-day as Harpo Marx."

Harpo also performed on his own, and concertized throughout the world. In 1933, he was the first American to perform behind what we call now the Iron Curtain. In Moscow the critics wrote that he received "an unprecedented standing ovation, lasting ten minutes." As Harpo was leaving Russia, he was asked by the American Ambassador to smuggle some papers out of the country. Harpo did so, with the information taped to his right leg. He states, in *Harpo Speaks*, that he was so conscious of his

burden that he began walking with a limp. In 1949, Harpo and Chico toured the British Vaudeville Circuit, a trip highlighted by a Command Performance before the Queen of England at the London Palladium.

Harpo also made numerous concert appearances throughout the United States. During World War II, he and his harp spent four years entertaining on the G.I. circuit. After the Marx Brothers completed their motion picture careers, Harpo remained in the public eye, appearing as the guest star on the television shows of Red Skelton, Lucille Ball, Donald O'Connor and Ed Sullivan. He also gave benefit concerts for orchestras, appearing as the conductor Arturo Harponini, conducting Haydn's *Toy Symphony*. After his death, Harpo's two harps were given to the Rubin Academies in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.

Despite his great fame, Harpo was a humble man. His son Bill relates that each time Harpo sat down at the harp on stage, he felt a cold chill go down his spine. Harpo would say to himself, "Oh, my God! I have to play for all these people. Hey, wait a minute! I'm up here and they're down there. If there's someone out there who should be up here, let *him* come up and play the harp. But if someone were out there who should be here, he would be here. But he's not! *I* am. I guess I'll play the harp."

Harpo's insights and unique talent for genuine self-expression touched those who knew him. He believed, "I would rather see a burlesque comic give 100% to an audience than watch a famous star give any less." By giving 100% throughout his life, Harpo—and his harp—touched millions of people. When Harpo retired, Red Skelton wrote:

There will never be another poetic figure, with your humanistic concern, whose philosophy is laughter. A kindly sort, without belittling his fellow man. You didn't have to speak—each gesture is sheer elocution. Your very presence proved "Silence is Golden."

*Editor's Note*

I should like to express our appreciation to Bill Marx who gave generously of his time to assist the author in the preparation of this article.



*The artist with an attentive listener*

