

HARPO MARX IS GONE

By May Hogan Cambern

With a sense of shock and a touch of sadness, I read the above caption. Somehow we always expect our stars of stage and screen, who have been with us so long, to be immortal.

To paraphrase the words of the timid young nun in "Sounds of Music":

"may I say a word in his behalf?
Harpo made us laugh."

Who could ever forget those early pictures of the four Marx Brothers, "Monkey Business," "Animal Crackers," "A Night at the Opera," etc. And especially the scene in which the brothers proceed to demolish everything in sight—including a grand piano. Then Harpo, with angelic wide-eyed innocence and impish childish joy, picks up the metal frame of the piano from the debris, tilts it back on his shoulder as he sits down, and plays a harp solo. As I recall, it was an old, familiar tune played with grace and a sweet tone; a breath of fresh air after all the zany chaos!

Harpo was the clown, but like all great clowns he had developed an approach of sincerity and humbleness toward his work. He loved the harp though he couldn't read a note of music, playing entirely by ear and rote. Yet he attempted to overcome these limitations by working long and hard, consulting with different harpists and teachers. Those of us in the harp world, whether or not we knew him personally, were well aware of this honest effort, and had a deep liking and respect for him.

Harpo needs no eulogy, and this is not intended to be one. For, like the bards of old, he used his harp to tell his story. Slapstick, nonsense, zanyness, yes, all these things were his, but in a spirit of riotous fun that left you well-nigh helpless with laughter—or tears.

So we bid him Godspeed. And perhaps at some future time, in some mysterious way, if Harpo is given the opportunity to continue his harping, he might teach the Angels some new effects—and even make them laugh.

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HARPO MARX*

Harpo (Arthur) Marx passed away on September 28th in Hollywood, California. He was born in New York City in 1893. He is survived by his wife and four adopted children. In recent years he had retired from professional life, and made his home with his family in Cathedral City, near Palm Springs, California.

Harpo was known on stage and in the movies as "the wackiest of the wacky" Marx Brothers, the silent member of the team. In performance he never spoke, but through the use of his large, bright eyes, beaming face, honking horns, whistles and rapid gestures, he was delightfully eloquent in pantomime. At some point in the act the fast pace of boisterous antics would be interrupted, the mood of the scene would suddenly change, and Harpo at the harp, happiness shining in his eyes, would be playing his sweet, tuneful music.

Off stage Harpo was a quiet, retiring man, his speech soft and precise, his manner gentle, unassuming but friendly. Without his famous wig Harpo was rarely recognized by the general public.

Harpo's interest in the harp began early, for when he ("Arthur" then) was a small boy there stood in a corner of his grandfather's room an old harp which his grandmother had played long ago. The little instrument, with its warped frame and few surviving frayed strings, was now unplayable, but it fascinated the child and, although he had never heard a harp played, he dreamed of the beauties of sound it must have produced. He resolved that he himself would earn the money to rebuild it and that he too would then play it. This particular dream never materialized, but 15 years later his mother gave him a harp. Already touring in a vaudeville act with his brothers, he had no idea how to handle the instrument. However, by working out melodies and chords and glissandos by ear, he soon played enough to introduce it into the act, and his first solo was *Annie Laurie*. THEN from a picture in a window he discovered that he had been placing the harp on the wrong shoulder!

From these first "poom-pooms" Harpo's playing was a great success with the public and he became identified as a fine harpist in the public eye. Many years later, still playing largely by instinct, he decided that he really should learn how to read music. Although he demonstrated his technique to several harpists, including Grandjany and

Salzedo, who were all amazed that he produced so good a sound with such unorthodox means, he considered Mildred Dilling as his nearest approach to a regular harp teacher. In making his arrangements he often consulted her via long distance telephone, playing the harp close to the phone for her advice and suggestions.

Harpo Marx was a great pantomimist and comic actor, but his life centered in the harp. Even in retirement the harp came first in the morning, and he spent countless hours at the instrument. It was his closest companion. It was through the harp that Harpo expressed his true nature.

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*Available in book form: "Harpo Speaks!" by Harpo Marx with Rowland Barber, published by Bernard Geis Associates, 1961.



HARPO MARX
Photo by Dan Wynn
—Courtesy of Arthur Matz

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COVER DESIGN

The Downhill Harp was known in its time as the "Queen of Musick," a title inscribed on its base. It is named after the town of Downhill, County Londonderry, Ireland. The harp was made by Cormac O'Kelly of Ballynascreen, County Derry, whose name with the date, 1702, appears on the soundbox.

The style belongs to a period much earlier than 1702, but this is not accepted as proving that it was made at an earlier date, since a style can persist in individual instruments for many years after it has ceased to be generally known.

The harp was used by Denis Hempson (1695-1807), probably the most famous of the Irish harpists. Hempson travelled extensively in Ireland and in Scotland playing this harp and used it at the famous Belfast Harp Festival in 1792, when he was 97 years old. Hempson was the last exponent of the traditional style of playing the harp with long crooked nails. The rare old tunes he played at the Belfast Harp Festival were among those noted down by the young Edward Bunting, who afterwards published them. These form the basis of many Irish tunes well-known in later years, including Moore's melodies.

After Hempson's death, the harp passed into the possession of the Rev. Sir Harvey Bruce of Downhill, Derry, in whose family it remained until recently. Now it is owned by Arthur Guinness Son & Company (Dublin) Ltd., and is on permanent display in the company's reception suite at its St. James' Gate Brewery in Dublin.

The wood used for the instrument was alder and scientific tests have confirmed that it is about three centuries old. The full inscription on the soundbox reads:

In the time of Noah I was green
Since his flood I have not been seen
Until 17 hundred and 02
I was found by C. R. Kely underground.
He raised me up to that degree:
Queen of Musick you may call me.

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