

A Harpist in Spite of Himself

by Alan Wheelock

Harpo may be the team's link to silent comedy, but his character is also the missing link in man's evolution, an unsuccessful stage in man's development. He is part man, part beast, a creature whose sole concerns are eating, grabbing blondes, and destroying everything in his path. (Peary 74)

There is a character who goes by the same name I do. . . . He can't talk, but he makes idiotic faces, honks a horn, . . . and acts out all kinds of hokey charades. If you've even seen a Marx Brothers picture, you know the difference between him and me. When he's chasing a girl across the stage, it's Him. When he sits down to play the harp, it's me. Whenever I touched the strings of the harp, I stopped being an actor. (Barber 12)

Certainly he could speak, and in the course of a happy and productive life (1888–1964), Adolph, called Arthur, later "Harpo" Marx managed to exchange words with George Bernard Shaw, Alexander Woolcott, Dorothy Parker, George Gershwin, Salvador Dali (who painted him with harp!), W. Somerset Maugham, H.G. Wells, Helen Hayes, William Randolph Hearst, Amelia Earhart, Toscanini, Prokofiev, and Greta Garbo. He was also the first American entertainer invited to perform in the USSR when Roosevelt's administration recognized that country in 1933. (The Russians, he reported later, found his act incomprehensible—all but the harp playing.) And by 1935, he was enough of a national icon to be represented by a float in Macy's Thanksgiving-day parade. (Gehring 74)

According to Harpo's own testimony, the family could only afford music instruction for their oldest son: that was Leonard, aka "Chico," who took piano lessons with the understanding that he pass on whatever he learned to Harpo. And so the movies' most featured harpist actually began his musical career as a second-hand pianist. The harp appeared sometime between 1914 and 1915, when Minna Marx, the family matriarch, decided that "The Six Mascots," a vaudeville act featuring Groucho, Chico, Harpo, Zeppo, their aunt Hannah and Minna herself, "needed more class." From Chicago she had shipped what Harpo described as "a monstrous, odd-shaped black box. Inside was the biggest musical instrument I had ever seen. A harp" (Barber 123). Three years later, after a performance of "Home Again," a vaudeville act in which Harpo played an Irish immigrant, a theater critic's review in an Urbana paper decided the direction of Harpo's career:

The Marx Brother who plays 'Patsy Brannigan' . . . takes off on an Irish immigrant most amus-

ingly in pantomime. Unfortunately the effect is spoiled when he speaks. (Barber 121)

Henceforth, pantomime (he would later be compared with Chaplin) and the harp would be his trademark: "I never uttered another word, onstage or in front of a camera, as a Marx Brother." (Barber 122)

Arthur Marx taught himself to play the harp and made some interesting mistakes in the process:

After a year of hunt and pick, ponder and pluck, and trial and error, I played my first solo on the harp—'Annie Laurie.' I got a big hand and a demand for an encore. The only encore I could think of was doing 'Annie Laurie' over again, with fancy long swoops on the strings (I didn't know yet that these were called glissandos) between phrases of the melody. . . . On the way from the theatre [one night], I stopped in my tracks when I saw a display in a ten-cent store window. [It] was a framed picture of an angel . . . playing a harp. What stopped me was the fact that the angel had the harp leaning against her right, not her left shoulder. Since nobody had ever told me otherwise, I had been playing with mine against the wrong shoulder. That was my first harp lesson. (Barber 125)



Harpo Marx

More formal lessons proved unsuccessful. After eight years of playing harp solos on stage, Harpo, who could not read music, decided it was time for some proper instruction. His teacher, he claims, was a harpist with the New York Metropolitan Opera who found Harpo's technique "terribly original . . . Could he see again how I did that glissando? Could I do that trill again? When I brought up the subject of reading music, or pedal work, he promptly shut me up. By the time the hour was up I had taught the maestro my whole lousy technique . . . That was the end of my formal study of the harp" (Barber 184). But a chance encounter in a music store with harpist Mildred Dilling enlarged his musical horizons. Ms. Dilling introduced Harpo to Bach, Mozart, Ravel and Debussy, "but she never tried to change my screwball technique."

In the thirty-five years since then, I have had many legitimate harpists, including great virtuosos like Salzedo and Grandjany, ask me to demonstrate my technique. They were utterly fascinated that I could get any sound at all out of the instrument, the way I played it. (Barber 184)

Two long-running Broadway successes, *The Coconuts* (1925) and *Animal Crackers* (1928), led to a movie contract with Paramount Pictures. In May, 1929, the studio released the filmed version of *The Coconuts*, starring Groucho, Chico, Harpo and Zeppo Marx. Sound had just come to moving pictures, and the problems associated with the new medium plagued this first (of thirteen) Marx Brothers film: flies buzzed in the overhead microphones; actors' shoes squeaked; and anyone opening a newspaper or a letter, or unfolding a map, produced a sound like a four-alarm blaze. As for spoken lines,

Groucho's delivery can claim none of the power and pungency we come to know him for later on. And Chico's lines don't sound funny when he says them. . . . Harpo alone emerges triumphant, an angelic devil . . . making faces . . . reminding the world that all the problems of sound recording are of no concern to him. . . . If it weren't for Harpo, those three brothers who sound so unsure of themselves would never have gotten anywhere. (Adamson 88)

The stage version of *The Coconuts* featured a harp solo that carried over into the movie version, where it established a precedent for virtually all later Marx Brothers vehicles (the only exceptions are *Duck Soup* 1935, and *Room Service* 1938, an RKO release based on a play. There's no music in it and very little humor). Harpo's solos were usually versions of any particular film's featured melody—its theme song. For example, in *Horse Feathers* (1932), it's "Everyone Says I Love You," one of that dark year's brighter tunes (revived in 1996 by Woody Allen in a film of the same name). In *A Night at the Opera* (1935), it's "Alone," a lovely melody by Herb Brown and Arthur Freed, best remembered for their award-winning score to MGM's *Singin' in the Rain*

(1952). "Harpo's rendition of the hit song 'Alone,'" says Marx Brothers biographer Joe Adamson, "is probably his most beautiful solo" (284). In *A Day at the Races* (1937), the song is "On Blue Venetian Waters"—music to accompany a lavish water-carnival scene more typical of MGM's later Esther Williams extravaganzas than of any Marx Brothers movie before or since.

With the exception of "Hooray for Captain Spaulding" (from *The Coconuts*, and later the theme music to Groucho's long-running TV quiz show, *You Bet Your Life*), there's hardly a tune anyone can recall from any of their films; but then musical comedy was never the Marx Brothers' metier, at least not until they moved from Paramount to MGM, where the studio wizard, Irving Thalberg, decreed otherwise. For example, when *A Day at the Races* was released in 1937, it was billed as "MGM's Monster Musical." Yet when one compares the musical talent RKO lavished on its Astaire-Rogers films (nine in all) of the same era—George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin and Cole Porter—with what Thalberg and MGM dished up for their Marx Brothers' vehicles, the difference is sobering. It's to Harpo's credit—and Chico's, too—that he made the best of some very banal material. But not entirely banal. By the mid 1930s Harpo's repertory included a number of classical and semiclassical pieces, and for the remainder of his film career and beyond, he added to it. In *The Big Store* (1941), the only Marx Brothers film to feature two harp solos, Harpo wanders into the store's music department, where two mannequins dressed in the style of Mozart's aristocratic Salzburg stand positioned near a harp. In a dream sequence, Harpo and the male mannequin exchange places and costumes. Harpo takes the harp into a corner flanked by large pier mirrors and proceeds to play from Mozart's piano sonata in C Major (K. 545), his flanking mirror images adding to the scene. Thanks to the best FX 1941 could buy, the flanking images become, on one side, Harpo on the cello and, on the other, Harpo on the violin—a Mozartian trio! The second solo, performed later in the film, is unremarkable movie music.

In *A Night in Casablanca* (1946), Harpo discovers a cache of Nazi loot hidden between floors of the hotel brother Groucho manages in that fabulous city. Of course the loot includes a harp, and in this penultimate Marx Brothers movie, Harpo draws on his classical repertory once more and delivers a respectable rendering of Liszt's "Hungarian Rhapsody."

It was mentioned earlier that Harpo was also a pianist of sorts, and in *A Day at the Races*, he stalls a sheriff and a bill collector by seating himself before a grand piano and playing Rachmaninoff's "Prelude in C-sharp Minor." There's a humorous story connected with this episode:

Harpo went around humming 'Boom, Boom, Booom!' all day, because he couldn't remember the name of the piece, but that was what he wanted to play when it came time to play the

harp. 'He's been playing it for a year and he doesn't know what it's called yet,' Chico would scold. 'It's Rachmaninoff, you!' Harpo would remember it was Rachmaninoff and then go and forget it again. (Adamson 319)

Harpo claims in this autobiography that he once forced Sergei Rachmaninoff to move from his rooms in the Garden of Allah bungalow apartments by playing "... his first four bars of the Prelude ... over and over, fortissimo." The fabled pianist's "piano banging" was disrupting Harpo's own practice session across the court (284).

But Harpo's Rachmaninoff in *A Day at the Races* is rendered on a grand piano, not a harp. And what a rendition! By the third "Boom, Boom, Booooo" the piano top crashes to the floor; next, the keys begin to fly off in all directions, and finally the entire piano collapses in a heap. However, Harpo manages to salvage the harp frame, prop it on end, seat himself before it and render a version of "Blue Venetian Waters," the film's theme song.

(MGM, who made this movie, would exploit piano-destruction scenes in later musicals, and Jimmy Durante, searching for "the lost chord," would usually be the perpetrator.)

Making harp music on something other than a harp first appears in what is arguably the Marx Brothers' best movie, *Duck Soup* (1933). Although this film is one of two that features neither Harpo on harp nor Chico on piano (their performances tended to follow one another), it does contain a brief scene in which "Pinky" and "Chicolini," two inept spies, attempt to steal secret documents from a wall safe. Chicolini urges absolute silence, but Pinky cannot resist strumming the strings of an open grand piano—until his partner brings the lid down on his fingers! In *Go West* (1940), the Marx Brothers enter an Indian encampment where the natives speak an interesting lingo—"Kulah! Kulah! Cocko! Nietzsche! Pardo!"—and where Harpo's accidental bumping into a rug-weaving loom produces lovely resonances. It's not long before he soothes all hostile breasts with a rendition of "By the Waters of Lake Minnetonka" played *a tisser sans tapis*.

By the time of *Go West's* release, the Marx Brothers' routines were becoming threadbare. That film's plot, for example, was virtually identical to an earlier Laurel and Hardy comedy produced by an MGM subsidiary, *Way Out West* (1937), but such borrowing worked both ways. In *The Flying Deuces* (1939), Laurel and Hardy are deserters from the French Foreign Legion who are caught, jailed, and sentenced to be shot at sunrise. In what has to be one of the funniest "harp" solos in American cinema, an ever-optimistic Stan Laurel attempts to cheer up his despondent partner by unmaking a cell bunk, standing its box spring upright, and rendering a soothing version of "The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise"!

The Big Store was released in December, 1941, just in time for America's entry into World War II: there would be no Marx Brothers' films for the duration. During the war, Harpo honked his horn and played his harp on

behalf of the war effort. "For four years I toured the G.I. circuit. I traveled two hundred thousand miles and played for half a million troops and defense workers." (Barber 415) *A Night in Casablanca* came out in May, 1946. Harpo and Groucho both refer to that film as the team's last. It was not. Three aging ex-vaudevillians (Chico was sixty-two; Harpo sixty-one, and Groucho fifty-nine) came together one more time to make *Love Happy* (1950).

You may notice that not one autobiography, not one biography, not one interview ... not one Marx Brother ever admits to having anything to do with this picture. (Adamson 404)

Apart from a cameo appearance as Sir Isaac Newton in *The Story of Mankind*—an all-star Warners release in 1957—*Love Happy* is Harpo's schwannengesang, the end of his on-screen harp solos. Unfortunately, that final solo is as trite as the rest of this misguided movie. Sitting on a bench in Central Park, the lights of mid-town glowing in the distance, Harpo consoles a young dancer whose Broadway show has just closed by playing for her. For reasons best left unexamined, the song he plays is "Way Down Upon the Swanee River." In mid-town Manhattan. One final note: a then-unknown Marilyn Monroe has a 20-second walk-on in this film, just long enough to receive the sort of comments provocative women have always elicited from the Marx Brothers. *Love Happy* may have been her first or second appearance on screen, and because it was, this film earned a permanent place in the never-ending story of Norma Jean.

Finally retired and living on the edge of the desert in Palm Springs, California, Harpo continued to play, to enlarge his repertory, and to get as close to formal instruction as he ever would. His musically talented son Bill, a student in U. Cal/Berkeley's music department, was recommended to and later accepted by New York's Juilliard School. And just as Chico had once passed on his piano lessons to his younger brother, so Bill Marx, half a century later, passed on his Juilliard knowledge to his father.

I don't know who Juilliard was tougher on, Bill or his old man. What chords he brought home when he came back on vacation! He had me pulling sounds out of the harp I never thought were possible. ... What he had done was a revelation to me. He had given voices to the full range of the instrument. ... My son, at the age of nineteen, was one of the few composers ... who knew how to write for the harp. (Barber 450)

The era of the Great Depression was a watershed of comedic talent in America: Laurel and Hardy, W.C. Fields, Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Mae West, Bert Lahr, and the Marx Brothers. Few survived the ensuing decades. Only the Marx Brothers continue to connect

with modern audiences, especially college students, who find Harpo the most intriguing member of the group. Whenever I show one of their movies in my film course, invariably I'm asked two questions about him: "Could he really speak?" and, "Did he really play the harp, or was that stuff dubbed in?" The first question is an obvious one; the second is more complex. Harpo does not, say my students, "look like a harpist." When I ask them what a harpist is supposed to look like, they offer the sort of picture that only the *New Yorker's* legendary cartoonist Helen Hokinson could have rendered: a genteel suburban lady wearing an elegant white (or sometimes black) dress and performing at a Vassar reunion. That's an amusing portrait because it resembles Margaret Dumont, that wonderful straight-woman who endured Groucho's insults and philandering and Harpo's outrageous behavior in so many of their comedies. That, I suppose, is a "traditional" portrait, but as Harpo himself once noted, "the only tradition in our family was our lack of tradition." (Gehring 1)

It's impossible to say whether Harpo's playing ever inspired any budding harpists. But clearly he added "some class" to nearly a dozen Marx Brothers movies (not to mention affording the harp more exposure than Hollywood gave it before or since). Minna Schoenberg, the family matriarch, was right:

It was a hell of a shame that Minnie never knew what a fantastic return there would be one day on the forty-five buck investment she made back in 1915, the time she decided that a harp might add some class to the 'Six Mascots.' . . . When I unlocked the mysterious black crate in the freight depot at Aurora, Illinois, I had no inkling of the kind of future I was opening up. (Barber 450)

Arthur "Harpo" Marx died on September 28, 1964. Almost to the end he continued to practice.

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About the Author

Alan Wheelock is an Associate Professor of English and teaches at Skidmore College, Saratoga Springs, NY. He has published and also delivered papers and lectures before both academic and general audiences—papers on Hawthorne, Fitzgerald, Science Fiction, the 1939 New York World's Fair, and various movie-related topics. Recently he co-authored with his wife Renate a teachers' guide to the 1997 PBS special, "Divided Highways: the Interstates," by Tom Lewis and Larry Hott, which received the George Foster Peabody award for an outstanding documentary in May, 1998.

Professor Wheelock has taught at State University of New York at Albany, Russell Sage College, and Williams. He spent the academic year 1993/94 teaching at Qufu University, Shandong, People's Republic of China, where he was named outstanding foreign teacher of the year by the State Educational Commission for Shandong Province, PRC.

Currently, Professor Wheelock is preparing a New York State Department of Transportation video-documentary script he will co-author with his wife. He lives in Cambridge, NY, in a refurbished one-room schoolhouse that has grown larger over the years.

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