



# Remembering Harpo: His Life and Legacy

by Rod Colvin

**I**N his signature trench coat, red wig, and top hat, Harpo Marx was a mugging, pratfalling, horn-honking clown who entertained audiences for nearly sixty years. He could bring down the house with laughter, but when he became Harpo the harpist, he transformed from clown to musician. The laughter faded and audiences listened in amazement.

Perhaps Harpo himself best described this transformation in his 1961 autobiography, *Harpo Speaks*. "There is a character...he wears a ratty red wig and shredded rain coat. He can't talk, but makes idiotic faces, honks a horn, whistles, and leaps after blondes. When he's chasing a girl across the screen, it's Him. When he sits down to play the harp, it's Me. Whenever I touch the strings of the harp, I stop being an actor."

For many moviegoers, Harpo Marx provided their first and only introduction to harp music. Today, thanks to late-night reruns of the old black and white Marx Brothers movies, Harpo continues to entertain audiences old and new. And even though last fall marked the forty-fifth anniversary of his passing, the comedian's music lives on. In fact, outside the professional harp community, he remains one of the best "ambassadors for the harp" the world has known, and his work continues to entertain and inspire.

## Celebrating the Harpist

Among both professional and amateur harpists today, opinions vary about Harpo Marx. Was he a professional harpist? Or was he a professional comedian who played the harp? Should his unconventional playing style make a difference in how his work is perceived by harpists today?

Regardless of one's answers to these questions,

the life and career of Harpo Marx was nothing less than remarkable. Born Adolph Marx on November 23, 1888, he came from a poor family that lived in tenement housing in Brooklyn, New York. Harpo dropped out of school in second grade and grew up working at dozens of odd jobs. Having always disliked his given name, he later changed it to Arthur.

In 1910, as a young man of twenty-two, Harpo joined his brothers on the vaudeville circuit. He took up the harp only after his mother, Minnie, sent him a harp while he was on the road with his brothers. She had learned they could earn an additional five dollars per week if they had a harp in their act. (The harp had belonged to Minnie's mother and had sat in the corner of their apartment for years.) Having some self-taught piano experience, Harpo taught himself to play chords on the harp as accompaniment to the piano pieces his brother Chico played in the act.

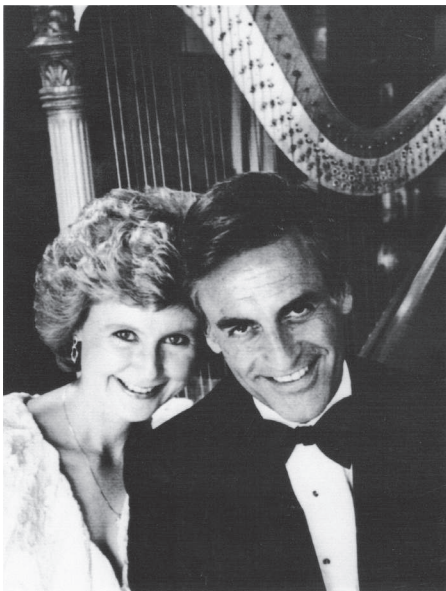
Through his own ingenuity and motivation, Harpo continued to teach himself to play the harp, and eventually picked up his famous nickname. In time, his talent earned him an international reputation as he performed in movies as well as in stage shows around the globe. In 1933, he became the first person in America to perform in Russia after the two nations formed normal diplomatic relations. He received standing ovations during the six weeks he toured there as a goodwill ambassador.

Harpo never learned to read music and received little instruction through the years. He did, however, develop a friendship with internationally known harpist, the late Mildred Dilling, and received some training from her. Dilling met Harpo when she was a teenager. "I don't know how old he was when I first met him. He was older than I was, but he was dead serious about music, and he had great reverence for my knowledge," Dilling said. "Music was an over-



Above: Bill Marx, Harpo's son, at his home in Rancho Mirage, CA. He stands next to Harpo's practice harp and music stand. A musician himself, Bill was 16 when Harpo asked him to be his arranger/conductor.

Left: Harpo Marx began his career in vaudeville with the Marx Brothers in 1910. He later moved on to major motion pictures and television. Photograph courtesy of Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images.



Above: From 1986 to 1992, Bill Marx and harpist Carrol McLaughlin toured the U.S. for several months each year with their concert, "The Magical Music of Harpo Marx," a tribute to Harpo.

Right: Harpo often practiced the harp three hours a day even after he retired. He is shown here in the early 1960s at El Rancho Harpo, his home near Palm Springs, California.



whelming passion, and classical music filled his life. The way he is on screen, the way everyone knows him, is the way he played after I began teaching him. We met before they made any of the movies. Harpo had individuality, and he never changed. I never could make him learn to read music. Harpo wasn't really an intellectual, but he was brilliant."

Concert harpist Carrol McLaughlin, Ph.D., professor of harp at the University of Arizona, echoes Dilling's assessment of Harpo Marx, and she's in a unique position to critique his ability to play the harp. McLaughlin, along with Harpo's son Bill Marx, recreated Harpo's music in a concert, *The Magical Music of Harpo Marx*. For two to three months a year, from 1986 to 1992, they toured the nation, performing the tribute to Harpo.

"We began the concert as Bill and Carrol, talking about Harpo and his start in vaudeville," McLaughlin said. "We had a lot of humor in the concert. Bill, a professional pianist, played the piano and told stories about his dad. His family photos appeared on a large screen behind us. My job was to recreate Harpo's music as close as humanly possible to the way Harpo played it. To get the music on paper for me, Bill went through home movies, Harpo's records, and reel-to-reel tapes and hand wrote, note for note, Harpo's arrangements.

"So, I have played Harpo's music, note for note, and it is as tough as anything I have ever played on stage. Some of his music is tougher than pieces by Tournier. His music is very advanced harmonically. He would play chords over and over just to hear the harmonies. Harpo loved the harp. He practiced three to four hours a day. When we see Harpo playing, he's playing from his soul. And I think he touched so many people around the world because the harp meant so much to him."

Toward the end of the concert, Bill appeared on stage dressed as Chico Marx and played the piano. For the closing number, Carrol came on stage, dressed in Harpo's trench coat, wig, and hat and played *Guardian Angels* in a solo spotlight.

How did audiences respond to the concerts? "We received great feedback all over," said McLaughlin. "People have always loved Harpo. Our audiences

loved the music and they loved the memories. The Marx brothers really had an impact on the world."

A few years later, she and Bill performed pieces from the concert for the World Harp Congress in Copenhagen and also at the American Harp Society conference in Chicago. "I still hear remarks about those performances. I've been in Japan and had people come up to me and say they enjoyed the Harpo pieces we played."

## Reflections on a Humble Man

Perhaps Harpo's music was, in part, a reflection of his personality. By all accounts of those who knew him, he was a gentle, quiet man who, despite his fame, he remained a modest man. Sam Milligan, who was a Lyon & Healy technician from 1957 to 1968, in New York City, met Harpo Marx on numerous occasions. "Harpo came in to buy strings or have his harp regulated. He was a real sweetheart of a man," Milligan remembers. "He was very mild mannered. Soft spoken and quite modest."

Milligan recalls an incident that demonstrated Harpo's modesty. "It was 1959, and Harpo had been asked to be a judge in the first Israel International Harp Competition. He came in to our store in a great panic because they had asked him to be one of the judges. Harpo said, 'Anyone of those harpists can play circles around me. I have no business judging that competition.' So, Harpo spoke to the man who managed Lyon & Healy in New York at the time; he had some connections to the people in Israel. They worked it out so that Harpo was an honorary judge, which thrilled him a great deal."

Today, praise for Harpo still abounds. Harpo's son, Bill, who's also the author of *Son of Harpo Speaks*, says he receives comments from fans around the world through his Web site ([www.sonofharpospeaks.com](http://www.sonofharpospeaks.com)). "He's an adored man. Everybody loved him and wished they could have been inside his psyche to learn how he lived in the moment, remained modest, and had no fear of criticism. I get comments from people remembering my dad from Sweden, the Far East, and from all over the U.S."

## Harpo Inspires

It would be interesting to know just how many harpists, both amateur and professional, have been inspired by Harpo Marx, but lacking a scientific survey, we have only anecdotal information to go by. Still, the anecdotes are abundant. Kay Lister of Easton, Maryland, offers one such example. Now a professional harpist, she started playing several years ago as an adult. "Harpo was my number one source of inspiration. As a little girl, I remember watching him in the movies, and I saw this goofy character transform into a person with such passion for the harp. I have the greatest respect for Harpo and the gift he gave me."

Barbara Guagliardi of Allen, Texas, was also an adult when she took up the harp. "Harpo was my introduction to the harp. After seeing him, I became smitten with the instrument. He ignited in me a love for the instrument that just wouldn't die."

Professional harpist and harp teacher, Karen Conoan of Omaha, Nebraska, came to admire Harpo as a teenager. "I enjoyed the florid arpeggios and glissandi that Harpo performed. I liked the beautiful harmonies and variations that he brought to familiar melodies. As a young student, I aspired to play as beautifully as he did and always hoped I could provide the pleasure and relaxation to others that Harpo did."

Harpo fan Steven Todd Miller of Madison, Alabama, is a professional harpist and a second grade teacher. He takes his admiration for Harpo into the classroom. "Harpo Marx has always been a profound inspiration to me. I started playing when I was fifteen and had no choice but to teach myself how to play. I have developed a children's program, in which I dress as Harpo and play the harp. I use the program to introduce children to the harp, and I also use the harp as a tool for teaching music education, math, science, and history in an entertaining way. I perform the program totally in mime in tribute to the joyful nature of Harpo Marx." When he retires from teaching, Miller plans to take his show on the road.

Shelley Otis of Plymouth, Massachusetts, has a degree in piano and became a fan of Harpo's only after she had started playing the harp. "Friends began

asking what I thought about Harpo, so I found some videos of him. I was blown away by how he played, especially since he didn't have much formal instruction. I am also inspired by his innovation."

According to Carrol McLaughlin, "Harpo's influence is far-reaching." McLaughlin has also taught harp for thirty years and has performed around the world. "I've met people around the world who say they play the harp because of Harpo Marx. It is a fact that many people play because of him."

When his son Bill was asked what he thought Harpo's reaction would be to hearing that decades later he still inspires harpists, Bill replied, "Because he was such a regular guy and was not egotistical, I think Dad would say, 'I'm a little surprised but thrilled.' Then he'd roll on to the next subject as quickly as he could and say something like, 'Now, get your golf shoes and let's play nine holes.'"

## Harpo's Farewell Performance

History has a tendency to remember many celebrities with a certain amount of reverence—whether it is deserved or not. However, the reverence accorded to Harpo Marx is anything but overstated. Modern screenwriter and Harpo Marx historian Benji Samit describes him this way: "He was a gentle, compassionate, comedic genius. People were drawn to him for reasons that even he could not explain. Harpo had a genuine love for life that people found immensely appealing. It was almost contagious. Wherever he went, he loved people, and they loved him right back. Some have described him as one of the kindest men in show business."

The public's regard for Harpo Marx was clearly demonstrated during his farewell performance on the evening of January 19, 1963. Comedian Allan Sherman, a friend of Harpo's, tells the story in his book *A Gift of Laughter*, in which he devotes a chapter to Harpo. It was a night that made show business history.

Harpo had appeared in concert with Sherman, and just before the show, Harpo left a note in Sherman's dressing room, saying that he was retiring and that the evening's performance was to be his last. After Harpo played the harp and shuffled off, Sherman

walked on stage and attempted to tell the audience that they had just seen the farewell performance of Harpo Marx; however, Sherman dissolved into tears to the point of not being able to get all the words out. Three thousand people sat in the audience, wondering what was happening.

At that point, Harpo walked on stage and the audience began to applaud. Harpo waved his hand to stop them, and took the microphone, and said, "Now! As I was about to say in 1907..." The audience roared at Harpo's reference to his not speaking on stage for the past fifty-six years. Harpo went on talking, evoking more laughter. "Say, I like this talking business," he said. "I think I've found a whole new career."

Then, Harpo told them he was really leaving show business, and there were shouts of "No! No!" Many in the audience were weeping. According to Sherman's account, Harpo handed him the microphone and began to walk off stage, but the audience wouldn't let him. They gave him a standing ovation that lasted nearly seven minutes.

Sherman later said, "I never expect to see anything like it again. It was an outpouring of love—gathered over the years for this man who had spoken so eloquently in every language without saying one word."

Twenty-one months after his farewell performance, Harpo was gone. He died of complications from heart surgery in September 1964. Reflecting on the public admiration for Harpo Marx, Sherman said, "Harpo left more than a monument and more than a fortune. He left us all the gift of laughter."

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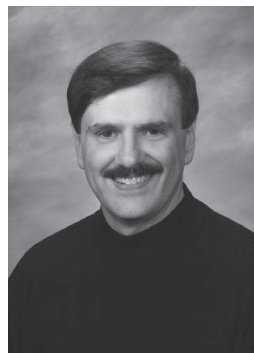
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Indeed, Harpo Marx left the world many gifts—the gift of laughter was one of them. And for many of us, he left the gift of inspiration.

### About the author:



*Rod Colvin, Omaha, Nebraska, started taking harp lessons three years ago. "My 'journey into the strings,' has been such an enriching one, and I have Harpo to thank. I was first inspired by him years ago as a child, when I saw him play "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" on the TV show I*

*Love Lucy. Colvin is a student of Mary Bircher, harpist for the Omaha Symphony. He's a member of the Great Plains Chapter of the American Harp Society.*

*Colvin is the author of three nonfiction books and is currently the publisher at Addicus Books, Inc., in Omaha, Nebraska.*

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