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Honks, Whistles, and Harp: The Transnational Sound of Harpo Marx

Marie Ventura

Introduction: a Transnational Trickster

- 1 In early autumn, 1933, New York critic Alexander Woollcott telephoned his friend Harpo Marx with a singular proposal. Having just learned that President Franklin Roosevelt was about to carry out his campaign promise to have the United States recognize the Soviet Union, Woollcott—a great friend and supporter of the Roosevelts, and Eleanor Roosevelt in particular—had decided “that Harpo Marx should be the first American artist to perform in Moscow after the US and the USSR become friendly nations” (Marx and Barber 297).

“They’ll adore you,” Woollcott told him. “With a name like yours, how can you miss? Can’t you see the three-sheets? *‘Presenting Marx—In person!’*” (Marx and Barber 297)

- 2 Harpo’s response, quite naturally, was a rather vehement: you’re crazy! The forty-four-year-old performer had no intention of going to Russia.¹ In 1933, he was working in Hollywood as one of a family comedy team of four Marx Brothers: Chico, Harpo, Groucho, and Zeppo. Their latest team effort, the movie *Duck Soup*, was due to come out later that fall. Yet Woollcott had chosen Harpo, and Harpo alone, to travel to Moscow and try to make the Russians laugh.
- 3 Why Harpo, and not his brothers? What was it about Harpo Marx the Americans hoped might traverse the icy walls of politics to reach their guarded new allies?
- 4 The Harpo we see in the Marx Brothers’ works is a noisy mute, a clever idiot, a guileless rake, an untrained virtuoso whose improvised harp technique continues to make experts shake their heads and wonder, while leaving his listeners in awe. He never speaks on screen, yet he is undoubtedly as much a creature of music and sound as he is of motion and sight, communicating his attitudes and feelings with pantomime gestures, shrill whistles, honking horns: zany, noisy physical comedy he skillfully

counterpoints with the virtuosic strumming of his golden pedal harp. Harpo could play host to a living tattoo; conceal dogs, life preservers, whole hams, and a kitchen sink in his coat pockets; ride a neon Pegasus across a billboard and flicker in and out with the flashing light display.² But, it was his close connection to his beloved harp that gave Harpo's puckish character its most magical facet: an idiosyncratically supernatural quality that transcended comic stereotypes, elevating his prankish, pantomimic antics to a plane Marx critics and biographers have described as "surreal" (Fix chap. 7, Kindle; Louvish 238, Kindle).

- 5 As his career progressed, Harpo and his harp stumbled unknowingly, and unintentionally, into a musical and temperamental affiliation with the mythical Trickster archetype: an instinctive association that struck a visceral chord with audiences across the world, and lent his character a distinctive transnational aspect (Fix chap. 7, Kindle; Smith 101). The strange incongruities and juxtapositions inherent to his unspeaking, musical persona both fascinated and discomfited his contemporary viewers, but they also allowed Harpo a singular freedom—a freedom not afforded his fast-talking brothers or, indeed, any character explicitly tied to verbal language, yet which was recognized, and envied, by Woollcott and the Russian artists who witnessed his live performances (Marx and Barber 301-3). This was the freedom to cross and challenge established societal boundaries: boundaries of class, culture, and wartime politics in a world increasingly defined by the strains of two world wars, a great depression, and the polarizing ideologies that would eventually shape the Cold War (Marx and Barber 301-3).
- 6 This unique ability will be examined in three sections, drawing primarily on the Marx Brothers' films and supplemented by contemporary and later biographical and scholarly observations. The first section will explore the evolution of Harpo's character and his relationship with his music and how that relationship allowed him to transcend social boundaries. The second section will investigate Harpo's life-changing experience in Russia, and the third section will analyze Harpo's gradual musical transition from a tramp-like trickster to an earthly guardian angel capable of imbuing his poignant solo in *A Night in Casablanca* (Archie Mayo, 1946) and his final rooftop romp in *Love Happy* (David Miller, 1949) with richly layered meaning. Ultimately, the intent is to highlight those moments where the transnational sound of Harpo Marx can still be heard, reverberating in the liminal spaces between laughter and scorn, sympathy and cruelty, wealth and poverty, preserved in the time capsules that are the Marx Brothers' surviving works.³

Crossing Boundaries: Flirting with Society

- 7 Harpo and his brothers grew up, worked, and developed their distinctive characters together as a family team, sharing the hardships of the road and the fickle tribulations of show business. As a result, when the group comes together on screen, their complementary talent and energy is greater than the sum of its parts. Any analysis of Harpo must acknowledge this context. This section will compare each brother's approach to social conventions and the boundaries of social class to illustrate how Harpo used his music to transcend them.

9 Contrasting and bridging the divide between purportedly high and low cultural attitudes and pursuits is one of the many satiric themes embraced by the Marx Brothers in their films. This is, perhaps, most famously demonstrated in their classic MGM picture, *A Night at the Opera* (Sam Wood, 1935), in which Harpo, Chico, and Groucho contrive to replace the renowned, yet overrated and abusive, tenor Lassparri with a younger, more genuinely talented unknown, but it is clear in their other works as well. From their first entrance in their first film, *The Cocoanuts* (Joseph Santley and Robert Florey, 1929)—an early talkie adaptation of their Broadway hit by the same name—the mischievous, musical Harpo, accompanied by his sly cohort Chico, are shown to be little more than ragamuffin “tramps” off the street; unabashedly opportunistic pickpockets and petty thieves who give hotel manager Groucho “the run-around” while carrying an empty suitcase with the stated intent of filling it before they leave. Yet, while Groucho, Chico, and Zeppo always seem to maintain some tie to social convention despite their absurd wordplay and zany antics, Harpo, with his goat-like appetite for buttons, blotters, and telephones; his impulsive gestures; squeaky clarinet; and wild, wide-eyed stare, is often considered by those around him to be (at first glance) too dumb, but later too *different*, to fit any accepted behavioral mold. By “breaking down his character’s reality,” with his physical jokes, Harpo essentially shreds both the more conventional characters’ and the audience’s “expectations of consistency,” shifting the familiar, grounded setting of a hotel, ocean liner, opera house, city street, or elegant mansion—at least for a moment—to a “semireal world” where a clown can stop traffic at the whim of his stomach, then merrily turn the tables on an intrusive cop by locking him in his dogcatcher’s wagon (Dale 139-40).⁴

10

11 Although each of the Brothers’ characters continued to adapt, change, and develop throughout their stage, film and, subsequent, radio and television careers, their appearance and general attitudes remained consistent and immediately recognizable.⁵ In every film—perhaps, most notably, in *Monkey Business* (Norman Z. McLeod, 1931) in which the Brothers play stowaways on a cross-Atlantic ocean liner—the four of them are shown to live by their wits, provoking trouble with crooks and authority figures just for the challenge and joy of the chase.

12

13 Groucho is most often portrayed as a middle class professional (occasionally discredited), who most likely hoisted himself up by his bootstraps. Dressed in his trademark black coat, neat white shirt, and baggy trousers, he plays managers, professors, lawyers, doctors, detectives, and even political leaders. Well read, meritocratic, and ambitious to carve a place for himself among the higher rungs of the social ladder, Groucho strives to inveigle his way into the ample bosom of daunting society matriarchs (most of these played by the indomitable Margaret Dumont) with pointed puns and barely shaded insults, while Zeppo—the youngest Marx Brother and least developed stage character—generally plays his lackey, assistant, or son.⁶

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15 Chico, by contrast, plays a working-class immigrant, his punning and deliberate misuses of the English language revealing the absurdities of verbal communication while mirroring the challenges faced by real immigrants learning to understand and adapt to American cultural norms (Louvish 217).⁷ Sharp-eyed and cocky, Chico

maintains a rather slyly submissive attitude among those who consider themselves his social betters, humoring Groucho's get-rich schemes and accepting odd jobs and orders from the wealthy set with little question or argument. His lively musical routines on the piano are nothing short of acrobatic and he rarely performs without a crowd nearby, his hands darting, gliding, pointing, and cartwheeling over the keys as he shamelessly flirts with his adoring audience (Dale 145-46).⁸

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17 Harpo, whose character appears in a red or yellow fright wig, battered hat, and tattered raincoat, takes odd jobs, such as jockey, dogcatcher, iceman, floor sweeper, hired thief or kidnapper, but is rarely defined by them in the same fashion as Groucho.⁹ Although he can behave as a chameleon, adopting or mocking the appearance, mannerisms or attitudes of those around him (including, in *Monkey Business* (1931), the puppets in a *Punch and Judy* show), his approach to society is to always be himself, no matter the setting or situation.¹⁰ When he settles in behind his beloved harp, sometimes alone, sometimes not, his style is to draw his listeners in, ensnaring them in his own, unique brand of attentive silence. Once unveiled, Harpo's relationship with his harp, and with music and sound in general, imbues his otherwise impulsive, impish character with a new, ineffable quality that transcends his rough clothes and appearance, revealing the tramp the society set had scorned or striven to politely overlook as an artist of impressive depth and spirit, more than worthy of admiration (Rensch 276).¹¹ As Grover-Friedlander put it, "On the harp, Harpo's childlike behavior is transformed into angelic virtuoso playing. We are attracted to the new image opened by Harpo's harp and the suddenly solemn expression on his face. He is so transformed that, often, following the movement of his hands is the only comic element left over in the otherwise acoustic pause" (39).

18 Harpo's gentle, almost poetic musical interludes grace all but two of his films, offering the audience a brief "refreshment" before the wild scenes continue.¹² But, the sudden silence and emotional effect provoked by his harp playing is also attested to by those who witnessed his live stage performances. Alexander Woollcott described the experience of watching Harpo on Broadway:

Nightly now in the performance of *The Cocoanuts* at the Lyric Theatre [...] there comes a moment when a mute and ineffably comic clown stops his antics, cuddles up in a pool of light to a great, golden harp and plays it with a caressing stroke that is all his own. Nightly the hilarious audience, of which you would have sworn that each member would rather die then and there than listen to anyone play anything pays him the tribute of an abrupt and breathless hush. Even the commuters forget all about that 11.25 for Mamaroneck and when his turn is done, the applause is an avalanche (45).

19 Harpo's earnest, playful performances earned him those warm moments in the spotlight, but he did not reach that place alone. Harpo's creation of a zany pantomime character who spoke only through his music had as much to do with his family's rough and tumble dynamics as it did with his own rather shy, quirky personality. Growing up, it was always Chico and Groucho being singled out for their musical abilities, leaving Harpo to wonder if he had any talents at all (Marx and Barber 12, 65). After observing how his big brother Chico charmed local audiences with his playful piano techniques, Harpo resolved to teach himself to play piano too. He practiced "like a madman" every chance he got and, once he had learned two songs all the way through, he and Chico devised a plan to get Harpo a job playing accompaniment for silent movies at the

neighborhood nickelodeons: Chico going to each audition for him, then Harpo showing up to play (Marx and Barber, 66, 83-84). Of course, once the managers realized Harpo's entire repertoire consisted of two songs played in one key, he'd be fired. This was not an encouraging start for a budding musician. But even then, Harpo recognized that the piano was Chico's instrument, just as singing was becoming his younger brother Groucho's burgeoning claim to fame. No matter how hard he practiced, Harpo could only hope to be an echo...until he found his own voice in his beloved harp—an epiphany of self-discovery that came only after he reached adulthood (Marx and Barber 30, 83-84, 123-25).

- 20 Harpo was well into his twenties and his early vaudeville career when his mother, Minnie, shipped him his first harp. Yet, her decision to send a harp to a son who'd long been struggling to find a place for himself did not come out of the blue, and neither did Harpo's fascination with the instrument (Marx and Barber 30, 123-25). Harpo's grandmother had played the harp in 19th century Germany, accompanying her husband's traveling magic show. After immigrating to New York City, Harpo's grandfather preserved her small harp's worn, stringless frame in his room where, as a child, Harpo spent hours staring at the silent instrument, trying to imagine what harp music might sound like (Marx and Barber 23-30). From the moment he first opened his own harp case, Harpo felt a visceral connection with the complex instrument—a connection that, over the years, developed into a tender, respectful relationship that helped define his public persona and private identity (Marx and Barber 12).
- 21 After that, the piano was generally cast as “the ‘wrong’ instrument for Harpo,” and having Harpo precede his harp solo with an introductory piano performance in the movies only “serves to delay the onset of the ‘right’ sonority of the harp” (Grover-Friedlander, 39)¹³ One of the most dramatic, and surreal, examples of this fundamentally visceral relationship appears in *A Day At The Races* (Sam Wood, 1937). When Harpo attempts to play the piano after Chico has finished his solo, the piano has a fit and bursts apart to reveal its stringed frame—which Harpo immediately, even magically, repurposes as a harp, sharing his satisfaction of finding the ‘right’ match at last [53:50-55:12] (Grover-Friedlander 39).
- 22 Gaining positive public notoriety as a harpist, as well as a talented pantomime, transformed Harpo's confidence, his bearing among his brothers, and his status as an artist and a performer. As his skills improved, “his brothers, who had little regard for his brainpower up to [then], began to look on him as a wizard. He taught himself to play, tuning the instrument incorrectly” and using a picture of an angel as a model for posture (Arce 95; Marx and Barber 125). “Nevertheless, with nobody's help, he [became] an artist” (Arce 95-96). It therefore came as no surprise when his onstage solos and constant offstage practicing earned young Adolph (Arthur) Marx the name “Harpo” in the same backstage poker game that turned his brothers Leonard, Julius, and Milton into Chico, Groucho, and Gummo, respectively.¹⁴
- 23
- 24 In 1924, the Marx Brothers' fortunes began a dramatic upward swing. After decades of climbing up, falling from, and reestablishing their grip on the vaudeville ladder, the team made the jump to Broadway stardom. Their musical show, *I'll Say She Is* (1924), took New York by storm—followed closely by *The Cocoanuts* (1925) then *Animal Crackers* (1928). From opening night, it was clear that people besides Harpo's brothers were beginning to notice, and appreciate, the wizard-like qualities of this strange, silent,

musical little man. Educated, highly cultured people like Alexander Woollcott, who took Harpo under his wing and introduced him to the trendsetting literary elite of 1920s New York City: the members of the famed Algonquin Round Table (Marx and Barber 169-72).

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- 26 Suddenly, Harpo's "silly boy character," the "nondescript" "made up as a boob," had gained dimension and depth; his musical artistry imbuing the silent clown with the unexpected ability to transcend and, thereby, alter the expectations and preconceptions of established society (Arce 85, 87). It was an ability envied by surrealists, like Salvador Dali, and it is apparent in all of Harpo's films, from his first appearance in *The Cocoanuts*, to his impish exit in *Love Happy*.¹⁵ Harpo's waif-like character floats as effortlessly among gangsters and spies as he does among struggling performers and socialite matriarchs, his deeper self revealed whenever he sits down at his harp.¹⁶ As his career, and fame, progressed, Harpo's partnership with his evocative harp expanded his onscreen persona, evolving it from a prankish vaudeville clown to an ethereal Pan-like trickster and, ultimately, to a sort of earthly guardian angel: a roguish, playful sprite apparently swept into the cinema from the hard city streets. As Groucho put it following Harpo's grand entrance in *Animal Crackers* (Victor Heerman, 1930), "The gates swung open and a fig newton entered." [13:38]. What better introduction for a man who strides into a mansion in a top hat and cloak, shakes hands with his hostess using a taxi horn-tipped cane, then blows a chocolate smoke bubble?

Crossing Boundaries: Breaking the Ice

- 27 The Marx Brothers have often been described as anarchists in their films, held up as the anti-establishment, unapologetically biting satiric vanguard of the cultural revolutions that rocked the 1960s (Gardner chap.1, Kindle). This interpretation may be a symptom of the fact that, like any honestly made work of art, every audience, from Depression-era immigrants to the political protestors of the 1960s and beyond, has been able to find meaning in their films; meanings that unavoidably reflect their own times and troubles. This, in large part, explains the Marx Brothers' lasting transnational appeal: "[t]he Marx Brothers were second-generation assimilationists" (Dale 157).
- 28 Yet, viewed through a historic lens, it is clear these films are very much in keeping with the hopes, desires, and problems of their time—namely, the 1930s and 40s. Far from acting to topple or redraw the social order, or ridicule high culture in and of itself, most of the comedy and character interaction in their films is based on the Marx Brothers' characters' desire to carve a place for themselves within the established order—much like the immigrant communities they grew up entertaining (Louvish 262-63, Kindle). While "their humor does have the turbulence that comes from merging with the mainstream [...] [t]he Marx Brothers' movies lack satire's concentrated, utilitarian purpose... Rather, they follow in a long tradition of 'festive abuse' that isn't so much aimed at a target as released and left free to radiate in all directions, even back on the clowns themselves" (Dale 132-33).
- 29 Viewed this way, the Marx Brothers' films support a meritocratic system strongly evocative of the American Dream that brought their parents, and so many others, to the United States. For all their puns, antics, and insults, the Marx Brothers stand as

symbols of that dream's fulfillment, having climbed their way from poverty to the mansions of Beverly Hills. As their biographer, Simon Louvish, wrote: the Marx Brothers are "not the enemies of Art [and Culture] but the greatest defenders of its integrity," opposed "only to their usurpation by those who wish to use them merely as instruments of manipulation and power" (297).

- 30 This image was no fluke. One of the most important influences on the Marx Brothers' characters as they transitioned from stage to screen was George S. Kaufman, a Pulitzer Prize winning playwright, satirist, and member of the Algonquin Round Table, who used his biting wit to lampoon American politics. While developing and writing *The Cocoanuts*, the Broadway smash that later became the Marx Brothers' first movie, Kaufman clearly saw parodic potential in these four madmen, using their forthright style and childlike insolence to call out social snobbism and conceit; punch holes in pretentious, posturing speeches; and champion true love and talent over the kind of inherited status and social obligation that rob the individual of their freedom to choose, and to fully express themselves (Louvish 93, 237, 297). As Groucho's biographer put it, in their films the Marx Brothers became the modern equivalent of the little boy who shouted that the Emperor had no clothes (Arce 315).
- 31 This was a pervading theme in the Marx Brothers' movies: the promotion of inclusion over exclusion, and straightforward honesty over polite prevarication. But, unlike his brothers, Harpo could not use words to name the bullies or shed light on society's absurdities. He had to demonstrate them, using the props he pulled from his threadbare raincoat's impossibly commodious pockets to strip the varnish from charlatans, reveal dictators as war hungry clowns, and simultaneously befuddle, exasperate, and charm the upper class.
- 32 Perhaps this is why Harpo's friend Alexander Woollcott decided Harpo should be the first American to perform in Russia once the United States officially recognized the USSR in 1933. Woollcott was good friends with Eleanor Roosevelt, and he delighted in playing opposites off each other. To his mind, sending silent, impish Harpo Marx to entertain Marxist Russia was a coup that could not be topped. Harpo could play his harp, perform a couple sketches, then close with a second round of harp music (Marx and Barber 316). But, for Harpo, it was as terrifying, eye-opening, and as life-changing an experience as a trip to "the other side of the moon" (Marx and Barber 300, 316).
- 33 Harpo's connections, through Woollcott, were able to acquire the papers and letters of introduction he required but, in order to get to Russia, Harpo first had to pass through Germany by train. He had initially been enthusiastic about the prospect of seeing his mother's birthplace, but very quickly discovered that Hitler's Germany was no place for the son of Jewish immigrants to linger. He described the experience in his autobiography:

In Hamburg I saw the most frightening, most depressing sight I had ever seen—a row of stores with Stars of David and the word "Jude" painted on them, and inside, behind half-empty counters, people in a daze, cringing like they didn't know what hit them and didn't know where the next blow would come from. Hitler had been in power only six months, and his boycott was already in full effect. I hadn't been so wholly conscious of being a Jew since my *bar mitzvah*. It was the first time since I'd had the measles that I was too sick to eat. I got across Germany as fast as I could go (Marx and Barber 301).
- 34 Following that chilling prologue, Harpo's trip across the Russian border continued in a frightening, bewildering blur until he finally reached the Moscow Art Theatre

(Heatherley 179).¹⁷ There, verbal communication between him and his hosts almost immediately broke down, at least as far as Harpo was concerned. He returned to the theater day after day, trying out his best routines in front of the director and “six or seven stony-faced characters who were a tough audience if I ever saw one,” and receiving only frowns until, finally, he grew so frustrated and humiliated he packed up and prepared to leave for home (Marx and Barber 310). Only a phone call from the wife of the Foreign Minister, Maxim Litvinov, convinced him to stay.

- 35 Before long, the Russians had developed a show of their own around his material—a very talky show delivered in Russian that Harpo never managed to fully comprehend. But, an American journalist in the audience, Louis Fischer, did, and he recorded his impressions of the historic performance in his autobiography:

We [Fischer and the American Ambassador William C. Bullitt] went to the Myusik Hoi, as the metropolitan vaudeville theater was called. First, Harpo had to be shown Moscow’s variety, and so the regular performance dragged on for many hours with about one laugh per hour. Finally, it did end. Now for Harpo. Yes, but. . . Harpo Marx had to be introduced to the Soviet audience. Accordingly, Pudovkin, successful Soviet cinema producer, rose in front of the curtain and delivered a speech punctuated with appropriate quotations from Lenin, Stalin, and Engels on the role of humor in society, on the social significance of Hollywood, and finally on the real meaning of Marx, Harpo (Fischer 301).

36

- 37 This introduction may have been part of the boundary-crossing Harpo never did comprehend, but “if Harpo could function without even understanding” what might this suggest about the relationship between his “hokum” and the “rational narrative” his hosts built around it (Davison 178)? During the 1920s, an avant-garde movement rose in Soviet Russia. Described in the 1921 *Eccentric Manifesto*, it incorporated circus-like stunts, absurdity and breaks in logic to challenge or reject traditional theater and the old order. The movement had briefly attracted the imaginations of burgeoning Russian directors such as Sergei Eisenstein, but it was short-lived, unable to survive the rise of Stalinist bureaucracy and Soviet Realism. Yet, while the Marx Brothers’ films—particularly their latest, *Duck Soup*—“...would have been incredibly exciting to the authors of the *Eccentric Manifesto*...,” when the “Stanislavskian criteria of story and explicable psychological motivation [were] applied to the example of the comic approach of the Marx Brothers,” in this case, specifically to Harpo, “[he] unsurprisingly [was] found wanting... [T]his kind of comedy was clearly not circumscribed enough, had too much of a risk of competing interpretations” (Hatherley 179).

- 38 Harpo’s description of his audition before Stanislavski at the Moscow Art Theater demonstrates this attitude. According to Harpo, he was told to do his pantomime schtick alone, without a straight man, in what he described as “the most miserable performance I’d ever given” (Marx and Barber 311). The director seemed similarly unimpressed, telling Harpo his “juggling of the cutlery was not exceptionally clever. I said I could do any of a dozen different bits, but they wouldn’t mean anything without an audience. ‘I shall be the judge of what your acting will mean to an audience,’” the director said (Marx and Barber 311). So, the Russians developed a script around Harpo’s “hokum” to provide an acceptable context (Marx and Barber 316). In this script, “[a]s in much of the Marx Brothers’ film output,” there was “an almost total split between plot and gags,” so, adaptable as ever, Harpo shrugged and went along, just waiting for his turn onstage (Davison 180).

- 39 As Fischer recalled, once the introductions and explanations had come to an end, At last the curtain went up. It was nearly midnight and Harpo in his famous straw wig appeared in a two-actor sketch. It was one unending laugh. Several times the performance was interrupted because the heroine just couldn't stop laughing. The Russians, whose laughing muscles had grown flabby from insufficient exercise, held their sides and asked for more. Harpo, among other things, did his renowned cutlery trick. Dozens of knives, spoons, and forks dropped from his sleeves. Then he took a huge quantity of silver from inside the actress's dress (Fischer 301).
- 40 Once loosed from contextual restraints, Harpo's noisy mute needed no further interpretation. But as much as his humor delighted the gathered crowds, his music spoke straight to the Russians' hearts. Surviving footage from his trip shows Harpo, without his wig, performing on his harp for his admiring Russian audience who, as Harpo put it, couldn't have been warmer. "I got tremendous satisfaction out of going into the hinterlands of the Soviet Union, where no Marx Brothers picture had ever played—where, in fact, nobody had ever heard of any non-Russian Marx except Karl—and scoring a hit..." (Marx and Barber 326). His return to Moscow for a second two-week stand was "triumphant... The house was sold out for every performance... I could do no wrong. I got so cocky I refused to play 'Rose Marie'" (a popular and much-requested song at the time) (Marx and Barber 326).
- 41 From a place of confusion, terror, and humiliation, Harpo had discovered how to play on his silent expressiveness and musical talents to charm the initially stern Russians, finding a hidden 'release valve' that let loose some of the heartiest laughs and longest ovations the performer had ever received (Marx and Barber 317). Harpo also used his music to charm his local guide—an admitted spy for the Russian government who kept close tabs on his comings and goings...though he managed to elude her long enough for Ambassador Bullitt to recruit him as a secret courier. Bullitt taped a packet of letters to Harpo's leg, under his sock, during a meeting in his private office at the Embassy—letters the nervous spy managed to carry safely to New York without ever finding out the whats, whos, and whys behind them (Marx and Barber 328).¹⁸
- 42 It is an integral characteristic of Harpo's trickster-like character that, on stage or screen, he could transcend the barriers of language, culture, and even ideology with his noisy, musical, wordless comedy, and this did not go unnoticed, or unenvied, by Russian artists, especially those who remembered Eccentrism. For example, the famed silent film director Sergei Eisenstein who, according to Fischer, had a natural penchant for comedy and longed to produce a satire lampooning the absurdities of Russian bureaucracy (Fischer 301-2). Prevented from pursuing this project by the Russian government, Eisenstein found himself unable to cross the rigid boundary Harpo had been required to traverse just to perform his act in Russia. After all, Harpo had just starred in *Duck Soup*, the Brothers' most pointedly political escapade which involved the four Marx Brothers mocking warring dictators into the realm of ridiculousness (Hatherley 179). But, Harpo was a jester, a musical elf, and, once in the spotlight, it was not hard for him to appear more supernatural than human—a character trait that, even in Russia, rendered Harpo all but immune to the political constraints that bound Eisenstein's creative hands. As Fischer wrote, "The mature can laugh at and criticize themselves... It is sacrilege to make fun of the dictatorship. Nor can you make light of its enemies. You can't shoot a man after you've dismissed him with ridicule" (302-3). Unless, perhaps, you are a Marx Brother, and your ammunition is a bowl of fruit (as in *Duck Soup*).

- 43 When it finally came time for Harpo to depart, he left “Soviet cinema directors dejected and jealous,” but his experience in Russia triumphantly demonstrated the transnational appeal of a character whose only audible language was music (Fischer 302-3).

Crossing Boundaries: from Tramp to Guardian Angel

- 44 The Marx Brothers’ later films are often disparaged by critics, and the Brothers themselves, as lesser works, but they demonstrate an interesting progression in Harpo’s use of music and musical solos from the direct, energetic goading of class and authority he employed in early films, like *Monkey Business*, to the more thoughtful, surreal, and even metaphorical solos featured, most notably, in *The Big Store* (Louis K. Sidney, 1941), *A Night in Casablanca* (Archie Mayo, 1946) and *Love Happy*. According to Richard Rowland, “It is not hard to find an explanation of the endless appeal of [the Marx Brothers’] films. They deal with the gravest question with which comedy can deal. They ask us [...] intermittently but irresistibly, ‘What is reality?’ Theirs is an unreal world: anyone can see that” (265).

45

- 46 Examples of this ‘unreality’ abound in all the Marx Brothers’ films, particularly where Harpo’s scenes are concerned. Whether eating buttons or sipping ink in *Cocanuts*, shooting at living statues in *Animal Crackers*, glibly pulling a cup of steaming coffee from his pocket in *Horse Feathers* (Norman Z. McLeod, 1932), taking the place of a camera in *Monkey Business*, posing as Groucho’s reflection in *Duck Soup*, climbing up the scenery in *A Night At The Opera*, causing a piano to self-destruct in *A Day At The Races*, gobbling food without pause in *Room Service* (William A. Seiter, 1938), getting coached by a seal while playing checkers in *At The Circus* (Edward Buzzell, 1939), turning a loom into a harp in *Go West* (Edward Buzzell, 1940), or holding up a building in *A Night in Casablanca*, as the brother least tied to social convention and, therefore, most likely to shatter it, Harpo seems free to walk or cross the line between realistic comedy and surrealism at will, blithely demonstrating his ability to flip a scene from one side to the other at least once in every movie. “This is more than a joke; it is a moral lesson,” Rowland noted. “In their world, disorder succeeds... Nothing is sacred; nothing is real” (Rowland, 266).

47

- 48 One of the most striking and vivid examples of Harpo’s characters’ talent for crisscrossing the boundaries of reality takes place in one of their later outings, *The Big Store* (Charles Reisner, 1941). Having been told his scarecrow-like appearance would ban him from a fancy reception, Harpo pointedly and imaginatively demonstrates his ability to transcend social stereotypes by magically transforming his image from dusty tramp to an elegant dandy in a powdered wig before performing an energetic harp piece. Significantly, this scene comes shortly after a piano duet Harpo had performed beside his brother, Chico—a straightforward bit of clowning that directly refers to their shared childhood (Chico says, “Remember I used to give you lessons too?”), when Chico used to give piano lessons to his younger brother [50:11].¹⁹ As they play together, it is again made clear that the piano is Chico’s instrument: Chico demonstrating, Harpo echoing and banging the keys [51:40-53:11]. When Harpo approaches his harp, however,

his character's transformation is one of confidence well as dress. Here, the discovery of his true voice reveals the previously zany Harpo as an elegant artist, and his turn at the harp imparts a surrealist sense of magic to the scene when his own mirrored reflections join in to form an impromptu trio [56:36-62:18].

49

50 The surrealistic nature of Harpo's character and performances was present from the start of the Brothers' film career but, like his skill on the harp, his dexterity as a performer matured and developed over time, culminating in a spectacular conclusion at the end of *Love Happy*, the Brothers' last film together. At the start of the story, Harpo employs his character's more supernatural attributes to all but literally become a street-rumpled guardian angel to a starving theatrical troupe, his coat pockets holding enough pilfered groceries to feed the whole ravenous gang. Later, his fingers become birthday candles for a ballerina whose thoughts are with someone else; a magical, though bittersweet scene that leaves Harpo alone with his golden harp [62:50-67:14]. His otherworldly nature is again emphasized in the concluding chase scene in which he cleverly plays with the light and shadow of film itself. Here, the trickster Harpo proves he can still out-surreal the surrealists as he transforms a rooftop full of tacky billboards into a dreamscape playground. Using his character's unique attributes to simultaneously lampoon and transcend the encroachment of Hollywood commercialism on cinematic art, the old dogcatcher demonstrates he has not lost his bite (Fix chap. 13, Kindle).

51 Yet, while these scenes may be slightly more serious than those in his earlier films—in the case of *Love Happy*, perhaps even reflecting some bitterness at Hollywood's highly commercial methods and priorities—Harpo's solo in *A Night in Casablanca* stands out as perhaps his most poignant. In this scene, Harpo has discovered a stash of Nazi loot hidden between the floors of a Casablanca hotel. For once, the impish pickpocket knows better than to swipe the stolen treasures he sees, instead settling in behind a polished pedal harp to play Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody* to a Rembrandt portrait of a pretty young girl [46:30-50:34]. It is a whimsical piece and he plays it with a playful swing, but this is a scene of layered meaning: musical, historical, and personal. Austro-Hungarian Liszt was the father-in-law of the vituperatively anti-Semitic Richard Wagner and, while he himself claimed to be “no anti-Semite,” many of his close family and friends were.²⁰ When Harpo's own personal experiences and background are taken into account—his German-Jewish heritage, his journey through Germany and Russia—his performance becomes all the more significant. In a room stocked with evidence of Nazi crimes and atrocities, this silent, Jewish comedian, partnered so effectively by his expressive harp, dares to suggest to a world still recovering from the Second World War that justice and post-war harmony may yet be possible.

52 In the end, of course, the Marx Brothers hijack the Nazis' getaway plane and Harpo flies them straight into the local jail where the bad guys are captured, the stolen treasures are recovered, and the Marx Brothers prove that they can still chase the girl.

Conclusion: Harpo's Legacy

53 “And in conclusion...” (Marx and Barber, II. *Bill*).²¹

- 54 Throughout his long and vibrant career, Harpo's close connection with sound, music, and particularly his beloved harp imbued his public persona with an ineffable, otherworldly quality, affiliating the characters he played with classic Trickster archetypes capable of shifting appearance, crossing socio-cultural and political boundaries, and even altering reality to suit his whims. This association crossed over into his private life, where his dedication to his instrument revealed a key facet of his personality, and his perception of music, to his son, Bill Marx, a Julliard-trained composer and musician.
- 55 "Most people who play by ear pick up first on the melody, and next on the beat. The subtle colors and textures of harmony are usually way beyond them. With Harpo, just the opposite," Bill wrote of his father, the self-taught harpist who never did learn to read music. "He was virtually oblivious to melody... But harmony! Ahhh! It was sheer sound that sent him into raptures, swamping whatever sense of melody he had" (II. *Bill*).
- 56 In a similar way, it can be argued that "silent" Harpo provided the harmony to the Marx Brothers' fast-paced patter. As demonstrated in the three above sections, Harpo was a creature of sound, of transition and inclusivity, his oxymoronic attributes and emotive honks, whistles, and strums weaving over, under, and around Chico's puns and Groucho's barbs while, simultaneously, allowing his character the freedom to cross from realism to surrealism, from ragamuffin pickpocket to trickster/angel. Ultimately, it was Harpo's unique relationship with music, with his horns and whistles, his clarinet and, of course, his harp, that allowed him to crisscross between boundaries other artists, filmmakers and performers could only dream of approaching.
- 57 It has been more than half a century since Harpo passed away, and more than a century since the Marx Brothers began their performing career, yet their music and comedy remain as fresh and relevant today as they were back then.²² As for his music, Harpo stayed true to his harp his whole life, the joy he got from playing the instrument each day inspiring his oldest son, Bill Marx, to find his vocation in music. Bill wrote: "Gradually, watching my father—his eyes shut, a reverential grin on his face—and hearing the wondrous sounds that resonated from his instrument, I became a musician...I didn't really enter the profession. I absorbed it" (II. *Bill*). And in watching his movies, we can see why. This is the transnational sound of Harpo Marx: the voice of his harp in rich "...tonal colors, shimmering, jangling, glowing, booming..." transcending all boundaries of language, culture, class and time while leaving the harpist, and his listeners, with "...goose bumps" (Marx and Barber 450).

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NOTES

1. Ibid. Although his autobiography claims his birth year to be 1893, Harpo was born 23 November 1888. See Note 14.
2. Harpo's doghouse tattoo was home to a living dog in *Duck Soup*.
3. Compared to other top comedians of the time, such as Chaplin and Laurel and Hardy, the Marx Brothers team appeared in relatively few films, and many of those thirteen works "exist only in prints of very poor condition, or with missing or deteriorated scenes"—most notably *Horse*

Feathers, from which many of Harpo's scenes were roughly cut out at some point, possibly for use in a documentary or to shorten/clean up the film for television, and are now considered lost. To date, no complete version of the film has been found. Even *A Night at the Opera*, which many consider their *magnum opus*, suffers from choppy patches and dropped dialogue. Their earliest known attempt at breaking into movies was a film called *Humor Risk* (1921) which, despite hopes that mis- or re-labeled prints may yet exist, has also, to date, been lost to time. Matthew Coniam and R.S.H. Tryster, "The Marx Brothers' Lost Film: Getting to the Bottom of a Mystery," *Brenton Film*, 7 September 2015, last accessed 26 March 2020, <https://www.brentonfilm.com/articles/the-marx-brothers-lost-film-getting-to-the-bottom-of-a-mystery>; Mikael Uhlin, "Horse Feathers," *Marxology*, last accessed 26 March 2020, <https://www.marx-brothers.org/marxology/horse.htm>

4. Harpo had a unique relationship with time and, by extension, schedules. He had left school in second grade and, since his family did not own a clock, he learned to tell time by watching shadows move against the walls of buildings. In his autobiography, Harpo's son Bill Marx related how, while on a trip to Britain, his mother had forgotten her watch and asked Harpo the time. "He looked up at the walls of the church and said, 'tap-es-try.' I looked at my watch and it was actually twenty-five minutes past three. Astonishingly, Dad was [...] close enough to the real time that we decided that we wouldn't have to buy him a watch for his next birthday" (Marx and Barber 28, Kindle.; Marx 79).

5. Harpo's character was so integrally tied to music and sound, he could guest star on radio shows and be an instantly recognizable hit. For example, comedian George Burns recalled Harpo interacting with Gracie Allen on their show: "Strange as it seems, Harpo was a natural for radio. Even if he never said one word. Probably the thing that radio did best was use sound effects, and the biggest part of Harpo's character was the use of sound effects [...] he did whatever he had to do to make himself understood" (Burns 126).

6. Zeppo was the youngest by far, and the only one of the Marx Brothers to be born in the 20th century. Although they adopted the common stage practice of shaving about five years off their true ages, records show Chico (Leonard) Marx was born in 1887, Harpo (Adolph Arthur) Marx in 1888, Groucho (Julius Henry) Marx in 1890, Gummo (Milton) Marx in 1893, and Zeppo (Herbert) Marx in 1901 (Marx and Barber 7, Kindle.; Louvish, 8, 35-36, 155, 216-217, Kindle).

7. Two prominent examples would be the "Why a Duck?" sketch in *The Cocoanuts* and the infamous "Contract" scene in *A Night at the Opera*, both performed by Chico and Groucho.

8. Dale described Chico in this way: "Chico is a mangy but spry little cartoon rooster, corrupt but not necessarily sneaky—like Groucho and Harpo, he can be oddly unhurried by conflict. At their best, Groucho and Harpo are unpredictable within a certain domain; this is in the nature of comic personae. For the most part, Chico is just predictable." This could be because, while Chico had taken over their mother Minnie's role as dealmaker, schmoozing with producers over cards, his life-long gambling addiction kept him distracted and only half present when it came to developing his character. Dale went on to explain, "Chico's interest lay in wrangling their way up from vaudeville to Broadway to movies and from Paramount to MGM by cultivating the men with the power to do them good... If Chico is underdeveloped as a comic star, he becomes fascinating the more you think of him half in and half out of the movies, which is biographically accurate."

9. Notable examples include the "Where's the Flash" scene in *Animal Crackers* performed by Harpo and Chico and Harpo's grocery pilfering scene in *Love Happy*.

10. Harpo disguises himself as a puppet in *Monkey Business*. Contemporary contrasts to Harpo's approach to society and his surroundings would include Charlie Chaplin. Both feature trickster characteristics such as relatively short stature, chameleonic traits and a reliance on trickery; both seem to have been swept in off the hard streets. But Harpo plays among the surreal while Chaplin's characters are generally grounded in harsh realities. Bob Mondello, "The Little Tramp: Frequently Down, Never Out," *NPR*, 11 February 2008, last accessed 10 October 2020, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=18659688>.

11. Harpo's impish personality and transformative relationship with his harp made a strong impression in many circles, from kids he inspired to try the harp to artists like Salvador Dali, from writers like Woolcott to political leaders, and, later in his life, Harpo often performed for benefits and fundraisers. In a personal letter dated 5 June 1963, former President Harry Truman praised Harpo, saying, "I think you have made a tremendous impression on the public and have been one of the greatest assets in the entertainment world." Harpo Marx Papers, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.
12. The two films are *Room Service* and *Duck Soup*. The word "refreshment" is framed behind Harpo as he plays "Blue Moon" in *At The Circus*—perhaps more a message than a coincidence? (Fix chap. 9, Kindle).
13. Grover-Friedlander, *Vocal Apparitions*, 39.; *A Night At The Opera* (1935), DVD; *A Day At The Races*, directed by Sam Wood, *The Marx Brothers Collection* (1937; Burbank, CA: Warner Home Video, 2004), DVD.
14. Monologist Art Fisher jokingly dealt the Marx Brothers their stage names along with the cards during that game. The Brothers did not expect the new names to stick, but they soon found themselves using them in both their professional and personal lives. The Brothers teasingly named Zeppo some years later (Marx 16-17; Marx and Barber 130, Kindle).
15. The fascination of prominent Surrealists, like Salvador Dali, with Harpo and his work is well documented. Dali presented Harpo with a harp strung with barbed wire, cutlery, and other things and, in 1937, even attempted to write a Marx Brothers script: "Giraffes on Horseback Salads." The Marx Brothers were polite, but distinctly unimpressed. In *Movies for the Millions*, cultural critic Gilbert Seldes asserted that Harpo and his brothers were "far more super-realist than the Surrealists are" (Gilbert Seldes 45; Marx and Barber, chap. 18, Kindle; Marx 144; Fix chap. 13, Kindle).
16. Harpo acknowledged the dualistic nature of his film persona in his autobiography, saying "There is a character who goes by the same name I do... He can't talk, but he makes idiotic faces, honks a horn, whistles, blows bubbles [...] leaps after blondes and acts out all kinds of hokey charades... If you've ever seen a Marx Brothers picture, you know the difference between him and me. 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 touched the strings of the harp, I stopped being an actor" (Marx and Barber 12, Kindle).
17. The Moscow Art Theatre was co-founded by Constantin Stanislavski, perhaps best known for developing Method Acting. Although Harpo seemed largely unaware, Stanislavski was one of the men "for whom Harpo auditioned the same inscrutable, disruptive vaudeville act that he had been appearing in on screen" since *The Cocoanuts* (1929).
18. Harpo's experiences in Russia have been dramatized on BBC Radio: Lee Pressman, *Harpo Goes to Leningrad*, directed by Celia De Wolff, BBC Radio 4 Drama. 11, Sept. 2007.
19. When they sit at the piano, Chico says, "Remember I used to give you lessons too?" *The Big Store* (1941). See also Marx and Barber, *Harpo Speaks!*, Kindle edition.
20. Kenneth Hamilton, "Still Wondering if Liszt Was Any Good," *The New York Times*, 21 October 2011, last accessed 6 April 2020, http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/23/arts/music/looking-at-franz-liszt-on-his-bicentenary.html?_r=0
21. According to Harpo Marx's son, Bill, "And in conclusion..." was Harpo's favorite expression, especially when starting conversation at the dinner table.
22. The reflection on his cultural impact published in his 1964 obituary still applies: "Harpo Marx and his brothers were important to a generation that sadly needed to laugh. The present generation needs to laugh too, but talk as our comedians do, the response is never as genuine as that invoked by the silent, lively little man in the battered top hat." *The Washington Post*, 30 September 1964, in Harpo Marx Papers, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

ABSTRACTS

This article investigates the role music and sound played in Harpo Marx's singular ability to traverse complex, controversial social and political boundaries—an ability that influenced Harpo's selection as the first American to perform in the USSR after its formal recognition by the USA. The Marx Brothers burst into cinema during Hollywood's transition from silent films to talkies—a transition essential to the effective translation of Harpo's character from stage to screen. Although Harpo never spoke in his movies, he was anything but silent. His character was a creature of sound, dependent on an emotive level of communication accessible to all with little need for translation—emotions he expressed in honks, whistles and, most eloquently, in his music. This allowed Harpo to transcend class and wartime politics; a freedom not afforded his brothers, or any character explicitly tied to verbal language and, by extension, a specific cultural outlook.

INDEX

Keywords: Harpo Marx, Marx Brothers, music, cinema, Broadway, politics

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