

During the Depression, the Marx Brothers Made Moviegoers Laugh

Groucho, Chico and Harpo made 14 movies together. Their films from the 1930s and '40s are still popular today. *Transcript of radio broadcast:*
17 July 2009

VOICE ONE:

I'm Mary Tillotson.

VOICE TWO:

And I'm Steve Ember with the VOA Special English program PEOPLE IN AMERICA. Today we tell about the Marx Brothers. They made many funny movies in the nineteen thirties and nineteen forties that are still popular today.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

There were five Marx Brothers. The most famous were Julius, Leonard and Adolph. They were born in New York City between eighteen eighty-six and eighteen ninety. Their father made clothing. Their mother wanted them to become performers. Julius, Leonard and Adolph started performing when they were children. Along with their two brothers, they performed in stage shows called vaudeville in New York. They sang songs, danced and told jokes.

Julius, Leonard and Adolph Marx began making funny movies in nineteen twenty-nine. They changed their first names. Julius became Groucho. Leonard became Chico. Adolph became Harpo. Another brother, Herbert, appeared in the first five Marx Brothers movies. He was called Zeppo. He did not play a funny man like the other three. He played a good-looking young man.



From top: Harpo, Chico and Groucho Marx

VOICE TWO:

Groucho Marx looked funny. He had large black eyebrows and a hairy mustache. But they were painted on his face. He spoke very quickly. And he walked in a funny way. He played people with funny names, like Rufus T. Firefly. Otis B. Driftwood. And Doctor Hugo Z. Hackenbush.

Groucho was not a very nice person in the movies. He often insulted or made fun of rich or important people. He made fun of doctors, college officials, opera singers, diplomats and government officials. He even insulted his son, played in this example by Zeppo.

ZEPPO: "Dad, let me congratulate you. I'm proud to be your son."

GROUCHO: "My boy, you took the words right out of my mouth. I'm ashamed to be your father. I'd have horsewhipped you if I had a horse. You may go now. Leave your name and address for the girl outside and if anything turns up, we'll get in touch with you. Where are you going?"

ZEPPO: "Well, you just told me to go."

GROUCHO: "So that's what they taught you in college. Just when I tell you to go, you leave me. You know you can't leave a schoolroom without raising your hand, no matter where you're going."

ZEPPO: "Anything further, father?"

GROUCHO: "Anything further, father? That can't be right. Isn't it "anything father, further"? The idea! I married your mother because I wanted children. Imagine my disappointment when you arrived!"

VOICE ONE:

Chico Marx talked as if he was born in Italy. He spoke English that was not correct. Many other funny men spoke as though they came from other countries. They were making fun of themselves and other immigrants who did not speak English well. Chico also made funny jokes about words and expressions that sound alike but have different meanings. For example, in one movie a woman sings with a very high falsetto voice. She says "I have a falsetto voice." Chico then says "Well, my last student had a false set of teeth."

Chico also was known for performing what was called the comedy of the absurd. He talked about things that were so untrue or unreasonable that they were funny. Here is an example. Chico is supposed to spy on someone called Rufus T. Firefly. Chico reports his progress to the man who asked him to spy on Firefly. To "shadow" someone is to secretly follow that person.

CHICO: "Well, you remember you gave us a picture of this man and said follow him?"

MAN: "Oh, yes."

CHICO: "Well, we get on the job right away. And in one hour, even less than one hour, we lose the fix. That's pretty good work, eh?"

MAN: " I want a full, detailed report of your investigation."

CHICO: "All right. I tell you. Monday we watch Firefly's house. But he no come out. He wasn't home. Tuesday we go to the ball game, but he fool us. He no show up. Wednesday, he go to the ball game, but we fool him. We no show up. Thursday was a double-header, nobody show up. Friday it rained all day. There was no ball game. So we stayed home. We listened to it over the radio".

MAN: "Then you didn't shadow Firefly!"

CHICO: "Oh, sure, we shadow Firefly. We shadow him all day."

MAN: "What day was that?"

CHICO:" It was Shadowday (Saturday)! That's some joke, eh, Boss!"

Chico also played the piano in a funny way. Chico did to music what he did to the English language. He made fun of it.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

Harpo Marx had curly yellow hair, but it was not really his hair. It was false hair, called a wig. He never said a word in any of the movies. Instead, he acted out what he wanted to say. He could make people laugh without saying a word. People always knew what he was thinking. He made funny sounds with horns and whistles to express his thoughts and feelings.

In one movie, a kind policeman tries to give him some advice to stay away from bad people. As the policeman shakes Harpo's hand, you can hear pieces of silver that Harpo has stolen fall out of his clothes.

POLICEMAN: "You better come with me, young fellow."

GROUCHO: " Don't take him away, officer."

POLICEMAN: "All right. I'll let him go this time. But I want to give you some advice. You're running around with the wrong kind of people. Why don't you go home?"

CHICO: "He got no home."

POLICEMAN: "Go home for a few nights. Stay home. Don't you know your poor old mother sits there, night after night, waiting to hear your steps on the stairs?"

CHICO: "He got no stairs."

POLICEMAN: " I can see a little light burning in the window."

GROUCHO: "No you can't. The gas company turned it off."

POLICEMAN: "Now, what I'm telling you is for your own good. And if you listen to me, you can't go wrong."

As you might have guessed from his name, Harpo Marx was famous for playing the musical instrument called the harp. He made beautiful music like this on the harp in several movies.

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

The three Marx Brothers -- Groucho, Chico and Harpo -- made fourteen movies together. The movies made fun of officials in many areas of society, like colleges, hospitals or the government. The Marx Brothers made most of their movies during the nineteen thirties. This was during the great economic Depression. Many Americans had no jobs and not much hope. Many people went to the movies to try to forget their troubles. The Marx Brothers thought people might like to see funny things happen to rich and important people.

VOICE TWO:

The Marx Brothers' first two movies were "The Cocoanuts" and "Animal Crackers." These were based on earlier shows that they starred in on Broadway in New York City. Some of their most famous movies are "Horse Feathers," "Duck Soup," and "A Night at the Opera."

In "Horse Feathers," the Marx Brothers make fun of colleges. Groucho is a professor and the president of Huxley College. He wants to improve the college by having a successful football team. Here, he talks to other college officials.

GROUCHO: "Now I say to you gentlemen that this college is a failure. The trouble is, we're neglecting football for education."

COLLEGE OFFICIALS: "Exactly, the professor is right."

GROUCHO: "Oh, I'm right, am I? Well, I'm not right. I'm wrong. I just said that to test you. Now I know where I'm at. I'm dealing with a couple of snakes. What I meant to say was that there is too much football and not enough education."

COLLEGE OFFICIALS: "That's what I think."

GROUCHO: "Oh you do, do you? Well, you're wrong again. If there was a snake here, I'd apologize. Where would this college be without football? Have we got a stadium?"

COLLEGE OFFICIALS: "Yes."

GROUCHO: "Have we got a college?"

COLLEGE OFFICIALS: "Yes."

GROUCHO: "Well, we can't support both. Tomorrow we start tearing down the college."

COLLEGE OFFICIALS: "But, professor, where will the students sleep?"

GROUCHO: "Where they always sleep – in the classroom!"

VOICE ONE:

Some critics say "Duck Soup," is one of the greatest comedies ever made. Groucho is the leader of a country called Freedonia. He declares war on a nearby country. The movie makes fun of war, diplomats and dictators.

Other critics say "A Night at the Opera," is their finest film. Groucho tries to get a rich woman to invest in an opera company. The movie has many funny parts. One of the most famous is when fifteen people are crowded into a very small room on a passenger ship.

VOICE TWO:

Experts say the Marx Brothers movies were extremely popular for several reasons. The brothers had been performing together since they were children. They shared a sense of what was funny.

In addition, they all loved music. Most of their movies include music. When a song begins in their movies, everything else stops. When Harpo plays his harp, his face shows how much he loves what he is playing. Then, when the music is over, the Marx Brothers immediately start being funny again.

The Marx Brothers' movies were like vaudeville shows. They contained something for everyone. There was comedy, speeches, music and songs. Often Groucho sang a funny song. Here is an example, called "Hello, I Must be Going."

(MUSIC)

VOICE ONE:

The Marx Brothers performed together and then separately for more than seventy years until the last one died in the late nineteen seventies. Their comedy influenced many other present day comedians including Woody Allen and Robin Williams. Critics have called the Marx Brothers the most influential comedy team of the twentieth century.

(MUSIC)

VOICE TWO:

This Special English program was written by Shelley Gollust. It was produced by Caty Weaver. I'm Steve Ember.

VOICE ONE:

And I'm Mary Tillotson. Join us again next week for another PEOPLE IN AMERICA program on the Voice of America.